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AS HE COMES UP THE STAIR.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'COMIN' THRO' THE RYE.'

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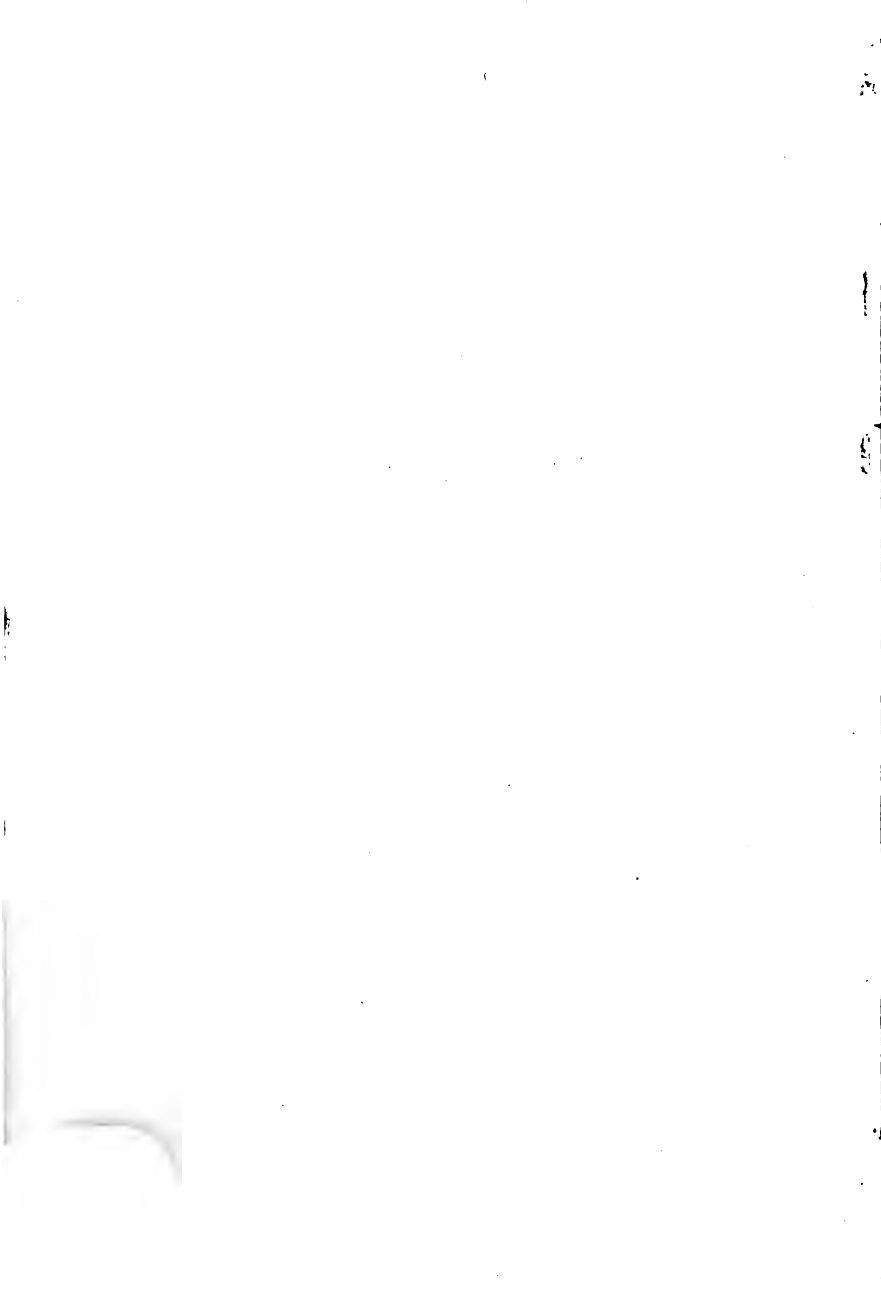
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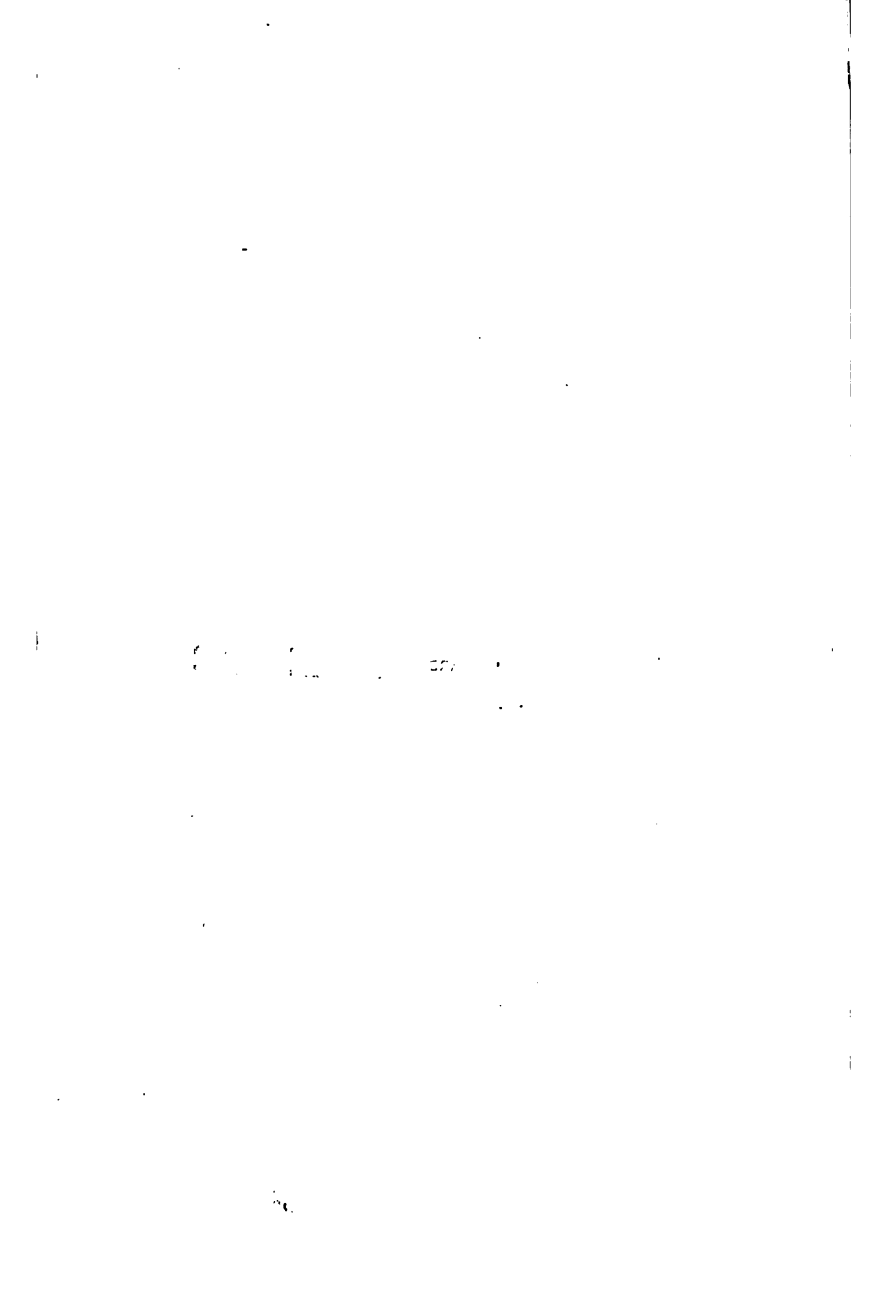


AS HE COMES UP THE STAIR.



Part I.







CHAPTER I.

NINON.

‘**B**AH!’ said Rose Nichol, ‘he is besotted,—mad, the winds would pause to hearken better than he; and all,’ she added bitterly, ‘for a foolish, flighty, waxen white doll!’

‘Nevertheless, it is a fine thing to be made of wax when it gives you the handsomest man, the best cottage, and the longest purse in Lynaway!’

Rose did not reply. She was thinking that not the best cottage or the longest purse aroused her envy, but the man Michael, who would have been beautiful in her eyes though he had been a houseless, homeless beggar.

‘It was a great pity Michael’s going away to foreign lands,’ continued Martha, wisely ; ‘he went away just one of ourselves, and he came back with his head all full of learning and thoughts, though they didn’t prevent his going down before Ninon like a lad of twenty !’

‘Ye see,’ said Enoch, speaking for the first time, ‘he had niver been in love afore, an’ so ——’

He did not finish the sentence, but looked out at the sea beyond, that seemed in the stillness of the June evening to

mirror back the faint blue-green of the sky overhead. A boat was pulling off from the shore, a lugger was coming slowly in, from the beach below floated up a snatch of children's laughter, a scent of new-mown hay was wafted from inland : over all was the peace and repose of the evening hours, when work is accomplished and laid aside, and the only rest worth the taking—the rest that lies between the cessation of one duty and the commencement of another—begins.

‘ ’Twill be a gran’ day for the weddin’ to-morrow,’ he said, as Martha went back into the cottage. ‘ Eh ! but ’tis you an’ I should be climbin’ the church stairs to-morrow, for we’ve been courtin’, my dear, a matter o’——’

‘ Two years,’ she broke in abruptly,

‘and we’re not able to be married yet while that Ninon girl, who only came here six months ago, and has had more lovers than one, is to be married in a real silk gown—to-morrow!’

‘Tut!’ he said, laying his brown hand on her shoulder, ‘our turn will come in good time, an’ ’tisin’t always the married sweethearts as is the happiest, my dear!’

The girl’s frowning face softened. Although this man’s love could not content her, it was nevertheless sweet; and his unfailing trustful tenderness always came to her like a solace, hiding for a moment from her own regard the restless, passionate, bitter-hearted self that she knew so well, and bringing forward the one, not beautiful or noble in any way, but lovable

and bright, that Enoch thought he knew and cherished.

‘Thou wast never giddy, dear heart,’ he said, drawing her nearer to him ; ‘an’ I shall have no cause to fear for thee, as Michael may for yon pretty heedless Ninon ; an’ when I’m far away from thee I shall always have a sure heart of findin’ thee faithfu’ an’ luvin’ in the house-place on my return.’

The girl looked down for a moment, ashamed, then, and as though the words escaped her lips involuntarily, cried :

‘And will not Michael have that same faith in Ninon ? Do you think so badly of her as *that*, Enoch ?’

‘I don’t think ill o’ the lass,’ he said slowly ; ‘maybe her faults ’re more o’ head

than o' heart ; an' you mind, my dear, she is not one o' us, an' she came from a heathenish place—they weren't jest so per-ticler 'bout things over there, p'r'aps.'

' But the strangest part of it all is,' said Rose (who spoke very differently from her companion, having received a good education at the town` of Marmot, up yonder), ' that Michael, so strict and stern as he always was, so keen to see a woman's ways, if they were ever so little light,—it is strange, I say, that he never noticed anything, only seemed to think her too good to go to and fro among us !'

' P'r'aps he understood her better 'n we did,' said Enoch, simply, ' for ye mind he loves her, an' love gives a wonderfu' knowledge o' the heart ; an' I don't think the

lad 'ud ha' gone on luv'in' her if he hadn't found a wurd o' good in her.

'Michael is not the man to doubt without good reason,' said Rose, looking down. 'He was away all the time she was carrying on with Martin Strange ; and then when he came back and the lads saw how he fell in love with her, not one of them dared to warn him, and so——'

'That old fool Peter tried to,' said Enoch, 'but afore he'd got ten words out o' his mouth Michael stopped him, and bade him look to 't that he niver did such a thing again ; an' he nor nobody else iver did, they was all afeard.'

'If Martin only chose to open his lips,' said Rose thoughtfully—'do you think he ever *will* choose, Enoch ?'

‘No, he luv’d her, too well for that. ’Tis a pale face the lad carries always ; an’ have you noticed it, my dear, a kind o’ desprit look upon it sometimes. I’m thinkin’ the morn ’ll be a black day for *him*.’

‘And she,’ said Rose eagerly, ‘is in constant fear and pain—any one can see that, as if she expected something bad to rush out upon her at any moment ; and when she meets Martin, hark you, Enoch, she trembles and turns aside. Yestereven I was coming along the sands with father, and we met Ninon. While we were speaking to her, Martin passed by. For once she stood her ground, but O ! the look she gave him, as though she were begging hard for something he would not grant—I

don't know which went the palest, and then we all separated and went different ways.'

'Was it just after sundown?' said Enoch, and something in his voice arrested Rose's attention; 'was it anywhere near the old Chapel Stairs, my dear?'

'Yes,' she said, her hand tightening on his arm; 'at least, *she* went towards the ruins, he towards the village.'

'Then 'twas Ninon,' he exclaimed, in a half-awakened, wholly perturbed voice.

'You saw them together,' cried Rose, breathlessly; 'they met up there—Ninon and Martin *alone*?'

He did not immediately reply; he was recalling with a certain amazed sense of misfortune the woman's figure that he had

seen in extremest abandonment of entreaty, kneeling at Martin's feet, as he passed with rapid steps a few paces away from them, in the darkening twilight. It had in no way occurred to him then that the suppliant was Michael's promised wife; the old gossip concerning her and Martin Strange was rarely whispered now, but Rose's words sent a sudden sharp conviction through him that it was Ninon's very self that he had beheld. Nevertheless, being an honest man and a true; moreover possessing that keen sense of honour which made the secret of another absolutely safe in his keeping, he never dreamed of telling Rose what he had seen, and to all her entreaties and cajolings turned a deaf ear.

‘Good-evening, Rose Nichol,’ said a

familiar voice behind them, and turning, she saw old Peter standing close by.

‘ Good-even,’ she said crossly, and wishing the old gossip at the bottom of the sea yonder, for in another minute might she not have extracted from Enoch the information she so ardently desired ?

‘ It should be a grate weddin’ to-morrow,’ said the new-comer, looking up at the sky and making the remark that every soul in the village had made at some period or other of the day.

‘ One would think that no one had ever been married in Lynaway before or ever would be again,’ said Rose, angrily, ‘ to judge by the fuss that is being made over the affair !’

Old Peter, regarding her for a moment,

turned his head slowly away, and, looking at the sea, deliberately winked. No one knew better than he the reason Mistress Rose hated to hear of this wedding, and in his feeble inconsequential way he thought Enoch a fool for not having found out the state of his sweetheart's feelings ; whereby he hurt nobody, least of all Enoch, for, since the world began, has there lived a single man who has not been dubbed at some period or other of his existence a fool by his friends ? It is a pleasant, opprobrious, non-compromising way of vilifying one's neighbour that commends itself to human nature, that is moreover never so apt to think itself wise as when it is discovering the folly of others.

‘Not but what ’twill be all show and no

joy, or I'm much mistaken,' said Peter, turning his head round; 'an' Michael 'ud ha' done better to choose an honest God-fearin' lass as was born an' bred in Lynaway. "Handsome is as handsome does," sez I, an' Ninon might well be plainer in her face an' handsomer in her ways.'

What could there be in this poor Ninon to set even the men, those sworn friends to beauty, against her? Was it that in this old-world, primitive fishing-place men must either condemn utterly the merest suspicion of lightness in a woman, or by accepting and making excuses for it, creditable neither to her nor themselves, stand on a lower platform altogether with her and their own consciences? To the honour of

these fishermen be it said that they were free of one of the worst vices of our great cities, that consists in the ignoble pleasure men take in amusing themselves at the expense of women ; in the pains they are at to draw out and encourage their frivolity, their lightness, and their vanity ; beckoning them onward in their downward course, when a few words of earnest warning, a steady attitude of scorn and reprobation, and entire withdrawal from companionship that can only be continued without the semblance of respect and honest liking, might warn the poor heedless butterfly from the path along which she flutters. They knew nothing, these homely fellows, of the zest bestowed on a woman's smile or caress because it had been one

man's yesterday and might be another's to-morrow ; they could no more have condoned her levity for the sake of the amusement that it might yield to them in the future, than they could have slain a comrade in cold blood. Out yonder, in the great town of Marmot, many a gay young fellow would have taken up the cudgels gladly enough for beautiful Ninon ; but here, where hearts were true and the mind had not been obscured and defaced by the world's casuistry, there were found but two men who had any belief in her.

‘He is content,’ said Rose. ‘What would you have more ? Some day——’

She paused abruptly.

Two people were coming along the path that lay between the shingle and the

irregular line of cottages and houses that formed the village of Lynaway—a girl and a man.

‘Ninon,’ muttered Rose below her breath, lifting her hand to her brow to ward off the rays of the setting sun, and marking with jealous unwilling admiration the delicate peach-blossom face of Michael’s sweetheart, the gracious curves of the youthful, lovely figure, the very poise of the pretty slender feet, and the love, sincere and warm, that lit the blue eyes turned full upon Michael’s.

‘It is no wonder,’ said Rose to herself, and hating passionately her own dark face, almost as swarthy, every whit as handsome in its way as Michael’s own.

‘There is Rose,’ said Ninon, stopping

short, her hand still thrust through her lover's arm, his left hand holding it there as closely as though it were a bird that he feared to see flutter away out of his reach.

The girls had been no ill friends in the early days of Ninon's coming to Lynaway, and before the man Rose loved so desperately had grown to covet the sunny-haired half French, half English girl, and they were friends after a one-sided fashion still.

Ninon crossed over to Rose's side, Martha came out to the door; their young voices should have made a pleasant enough music to the ears of the men who listened, but Enoch seemed ill at ease, Michael impatient, and the exchange of words between the two men, the fastest friends, the

most sworn comrades in all Lynaway, was forced and dull. Enoch was considering Ninon from a new point of view, trying to read her heart by her face, asking himself if he did rightly in holding his peace concerning her, and whether or no it was unfaithful on his part to suffer his friend to walk blindfolded into future sorrow.

All at once Michael caught Ninon's hand, and with a hasty good-night to all, hurried her away.

'Good-bye,' she said, looking back; then, moved by some unaccountable impulse, she escaped from his side and fled back to the group that looked after them. 'Will you not wish me a good luck?' she said, her broken English sounding quaint and pretty from the tender, childish lips.

‘For you shall see me never no more as
Ninon Levesque; to-morrow I will be
Ninon Winter!’

And that young and winsome face, so
imploring, so sweet, touched every heart
there save one; and they wished her good-
bye and God speed, but no one observed
how, though Rose Nichol’s lips moved with
the rest, there came from them never a
word.





CHAPTER II.

NINON.

WHY did you do that, Ninon ?' said Michael, as the girl came back to his side ; ' why should it matter to you whether Martha, and Rose, and old Peter wish you good or evil ? You need care for no one's words or wishes now but mine.'

The jealousy in his voice, nay, the very impatience of it, announced him emphatically to be under the delirious influence

of that folly yclept love. Probably no healthily-constituted man ever dreams or thinks of love until he is brought under the direct influence of women, and thereby is made to experience emotion ; and of Michael it might truly be said that upon love he had never wasted a thought, until he had met Ninon. When a man who is always more or less under the dominion of illness is taken with a fever or any other dangerous disease, he oftener than not gets over it ; but when one who has never been ill in his life, and is sound and strong in every part, is attacked, it is more than probable that he will die. The disease but takes the firmer hold upon him from the very strength of the resistance it meets, and the old

fable of the oak and the ash recurs to the memory, where the comparatively worthless tree, by bowing to the mischievous blast, escapes unhurt, while the sturdy oak, refusing to yield, is uprooted, and hurled broken to the earth.

‘I know that it is not for me to care,’ said Ninon; ‘but they are good to me—all,—and I do desire to have their kind thoughts with me always.’

He took her hand,—such a fragile, fair little hand, so different from his big, weather-beaten one—and kissed it. Was she not better than he in every way, and did not gentle blood run in her veins, while he differed in no whit, save in his clear head and speech, from the other fishermen here? It was now nineteen years since

Ninon's mother, forsaking her people for the fair-faced, soft-spoken Frenchman, who came one day to Lynaway, had departed with him for his own land, returning thence a widow just six months ago, bringing with her a daughter of eighteen, and a heart soured and embittered by the sufferings and misfortunes of her life.

The sky and sea were melting each into the other in that exquisite, indescribable grey that usually heralds the advent of starlight in the heavens, when Michael and the girl paused before a cottage that was surely very homely to be the best in the village; yet it had a summer beauty of its own in the golden mantle of lush honeysuckle by which it was covered, and in the great bushes of roses, white and red, that

stood one on either side of the door. Like all common things, they were prodigal in their abundance, and the snowy and scarlet clusters seemed positively countless. The white bush was on Ninon's side, the red one on Michael's, as they entered, and it passed through his mind how like she was in her purity and innocence to those spotless flowers.

There was once a beautiful custom in Rome, indeed it was part of the old ceremonial of marriage, that when a Roman took home his bride, pausing as hand-in-hand they passed beneath the flower-wreathed lintel, he asked her what was her name, to which she replied, 'Where thou art Caius I am Caia;' (Where thou art master, I am mistress.) A kiss confirmed the assertion,

and leading her over the threshold she became mistress of the house.

Of this custom Michael had never heard, yet as he drew her in, he gave her sweetest welcome by word and lip to the home of which she would be mistress ere twenty-four hours had passed, and all unwedded though she was, this, I think, was her real home-coming; on this night she entered radiant and joyous into her kingdom; to-night, and not to-morrow, she felt the careless days of her maidenhood falling away from her, and a new sensation of wifely happiness and peace stirring at her heart. They went hand-in-hand, like two happy children, into the sitting-room, orderly and neat, all brightened with the flowers that Michael's darling

loved, where his old mother sat in her high-backed chair fast asleep, spectacles on nose and knitting in hand, ready to take up the stitch where it had dropped when she should awaken. Treading on tiptoe they left her there, and wandered up and down, in and about their little domain, loving all things that they saw, since they were to belong equally to both.

They sat down at last in the arbour at the end of the old-fashioned garden, in which clove-pinks, sweet-williams, and other sweet-scented simple flowers flourished ; and Michael, taking his sweetheart in those strong and faithful arms that had never yet hungered for burden of any other woman, bade her tell him from her heart if she were content—if she would have

aught refashioned or otherwise planned—if there lingered with her one doubt of the new life that would begin on the morrow—if she harboured one regret for the innocent, happy days of her girlhood that she was leaving behind her; and she clasped those tender, soft arms of hers about his neck, and for all answer only prayed him to love her always, always—never to care for her less because she was his foolish little wife, not his sweetheart, whose faults he could never see—crying to him as one in fear to tell her whether she would be his wife, *safely* his wife by to-morrow at that hour. And there came not even the night-cry of a wandering bird to break the harmony of those soft, passionate love-whispers, and they two, hover-

ing as they believed on the brink of a happier and more perfect existence than either had ever yet experienced, knew not that the promise had in its sweetness outsped the fulfilment, the dream outstripped the reality—that never again in spring or summer, autumn or winter, should come to them the unalloyed unbroken happiness of this one hour, stolen out of the silent, dusky, midsummer night.





CHAPTER III.

WEDDING BELLS.

THE bride came stepping through the dark and frowning door of the old village church, the bridegroom by her side, and at her back half-a-dozen smiling, red-cheeked lasses, dressed in whatsoever seemed most goodly in their own eyes, and each attended by a sweetheart every whit as rosy and cheerful as herself.

Until the moment of the bride's appearance it had been a matter of doubt whether

the crowd assembled would give as ringing a cheer as so good a fellow as the bridegroom, so fair a maiden as the bride, deserved on their wedding-day ; but no sooner was that lovely little apparition in white visible, than a hearty and simultaneous shout burst from the throat of every man present, bringing a blush to the cheek of Ninon, and a smile to the lip of her husband. Such a beautiful little bride as she made, with such shining twinkling little feet, and such a happy light on the blushing delicate little face, as surely could not fail to warm all hearts to her, whether they would or no !

And yet in two breasts lay stones, not hearts—but a little away apart, too, in the eager excited crowd, and two faces alone were pale and cold and set—the faces

of Rose Nichol and Martin Strange. *His* looks might surely have drawn Ninon's ; *his* eyes might surely have compelled some answering glance to his intense and steady gaze ; but as though she bore some talisman that turned aside the evil that had until now been potent to molest her, she did not once look towards him, did not even notice that her gown—nay, her very hand, on which the plain gold wedding-ring shone, brushed against his garments as she passed him slowly by.

They took their way along the familiar path, and the motley procession followed after, man and matron, youth and maid, and came ere long to the house where Ninon's mother dwelt, and where the wedding-feast, abundant and simple, was set.

Of how all Lynaway was bidden to it, and how all came, save one ; of how when the house overflowed, the remainder fed, happily enough, in the open air ; of how the healths of the bride and bridegroom were drunk again and again, while all seemed to have forgotten their suspicions of her, now that she was an honest man's wife, with an honest wedding-ring upon her finger, I will not pause to tell ; only relate how poor Ninon, who had been growing paler and paler through the long hours of the burning summer afternoon and evening, slipped away with her mother, and being despoiled of all her wedding finery, donned her daily dress and set out with her husband on the homeward walk. Of how they met not a soul by the

way ; the very maid being junketing up yonder with the rest, and the mother having gone away to her own home ; so that it was an empty house they found when they arrived. Of how he left her at once to despatch the wassailers up yonder, and bid them all good-night, leaving her with a willingness that he had never known, had not the thought lain warm at his heart that he would be returning to her immediately. O ! that we could call him back as he goes away, away to the cottage up yonder ! O ! that the twelve hours' wife, who leans out of the upper window to catch a glimpse of him as he goes, to hear the echo of his steps on the footpath, could cry to him with the voice that he has never learned to disobey, to remain

with her, and let the revellers linger as they will . . . but she only turns back to the lamp-lit room to kneel and thank God for making her so blessed a woman, so happy a wife . . . Blessed . . . happy ! You do well, poor hapless child, to praise God while you may.

* * * * *

Ninon sees not how below her window, half-hidden, half-revealed, stands a man whose face, livid, frightful even, by reason of the intense emotion that convulses it, gleams out from the partial screen afforded by the leaves of the tree by which he stands. Though her eyes fell upon it, she would scarcely know the face for that of Martin Strange, the man who might have worked such

deadly mischief between her and Michael, and who has forborne, as she had once with sick dread and fear believed he would not forbear. She guesses not how out yonder one watches her shadow pass and repass the blind, as she lays aside the silken kerchief and chain and cross from her neck, Michael's gifts all . . . who can even see the deft movement of her fingers as she unlaces the blue bodice, marks the uplifted arms as they unbind the rippling heavy masses of the glorious hair he had once deemed his own . . . all this, I say, he sees and notes, neither stirring one hair's-breadth nor moving one step towards the house, although she is there absolutely alone and at his mercy. So he can have no thought of harming

her, and after all, it may be but the moonlight that makes his face appear so ghastly, his air so wild ! Thus he stands, immovable, his eyes uplifted, his hands clenched, and sees not how a woman's form flits far behind him and vanishes, nor hears later a man's footsteps approach, slacken, and pause by his side.





CHAPTER IV.

MARTIN STRANGE'S REPLY.

‘**I**T is you, Martin Strange?’ said a voice beside the watcher that made him turn, starting violently. He had taken up his position here since Michael left his house, and believed him to be at that moment in yonder house with his wife. Albeit no coward, he was thoroughly thrown off his centre by Michael’s unlooked-for appearance, and stood the very

image of detected shame and guilt, incapable of articulating one word.

‘I would have speech with you,’ said Michael, in the voice of a man who is divided between a mad desire to slay the thing before him, and an equally violent and imperative need that compels him to stay his hand. In that impotence of desire, that urgency of inaction, he unconsciously tore off a bough of the tree by which they stood, his hand strengthening upon it like a vice, as though thus and thus only could he restrain it from fastening with murderous intent upon the man before him.

‘I have a question to ask of you,’ said Michael slowly, and his voice was strangled and as the voice of a stranger.

'A quarter of an hour ago I discovered for the first time that you were formerly a favoured lover of—my wife's.'

He made a slight gesture with his empty hand towards the cottage.

'What I have to ask you is this: Do you know anything, great or small, to her discredit? Is there any reason (and I charge you as before your God, to answer me the whole truth) why I should not have made Ninon Levesque my wife to-day?'

No reply. Only the far-away sound of what might be a distant footfall, or the patter of a leaf falling to the ground, or the stirring of a sleepy bird in his warm brown nest.

'A quarter of an hour ago,' said Michael,

still in that slow, painful way, as though he had learned a lesson by rote, and feared to forget some important words of it, 'as I was coming towards my—home, I overheard certain words between Stephen Prentice and William Marly, honest men both, as I have found them, therefore to be believed even in their cups, beyond the belief that I should have given to Peter the gossip, or Seth the scandalmonger. They spoke of my wife—of me, lastly of you. Enough that I listened and understood. I say to myself, "There is Rose Nichol passing by, she was always my wife's friend—my wife loved her"' (it was strange to hear how constantly he said 'my wife' as though the mere utterance of it heartened him), "'I will tell her this lie

that I have heard;" and I said to her, "They have been speaking ill of my dear you know her spotless heart and mind and ways; you know that this thing is impossible, that it cannot be; tell me of it, assure me of it, that I may go back to her without one doubt in my mind, without needing to insult her purity by one question, or look, or word" but she only fell away from me like water, saying over and over again, "I know nothing—nothing; go to Enoch, may be *he* knows." I left her there, and finding her lover, said, "Rose has sent me to you that you may tell me that my Ninon is the pure innocent maiden that I loved—and that Stephen Prentice and William Marly are liars" and I told him, as

I could not tell his girl, the words that they had said.'

He paused, and looked upwards at the lamp that shone like a beacon in Ninon's room.

'The man I honour most on earth,' he went on, still in that unnatural, stony way, 'the truest, the most upright, the best, the man who has been my faithful friend always, faltered and turned aside; only in his face I seemed to read that which should have blinded my eyes in the reading, so I turned and left him, saying to myself, "There is only one man on earth whose words can heal or kill me now," and while I sought for you, Rose again crossed my path once more, saying that I should find you here, and now'——the monotony

of his manner ceased, his voice leaped out like a sword from the scabbard—‘I charge you, as before your God, that you speak the whole truth—is there any reason why she should have been your wife, not mine to-day?’

He leaned forward, his hand still clutching the bough, his pulses and heart standing still, the very life in him seeming to be suspended till the answer was spoken.

Martin’s eyes, straying upwards, rested on the blind across which was at that moment flung the shadow, grotesque and exaggerated, of the exquisite shape that had earned its owner the title of ‘Flower o’ Devon;’ then summoning the whole forces of his nature to meet the stupendous task

imposed upon them, he uttered the one damning syllable—

‘*Yes!*’

Ninon now came to the window, and lifting a corner of the blind, looked abroad into the night.

‘He is long away,’ they heard her soft voice say; then, without one glance towards the two faces that glared upon each other below, she dropped the blind and vanished.

With a low sound, that in its intensity reached not so high as a cry, Michael hurled himself upon the man before him, and gripping him by the throat dashed him head downwards against the earth, as one who destroys some hurtful noisome thing that, to a certain extent, expiates the hate-

fulness of its existence by the violence of its end.

It seemed but a moment later, when, the paroxysm passed, he found himself kneeling by the side of the prone man, seeking some sign of life, nay, that a thrill passed through him as Martin, dizzy and confused, unsteadily rose to his feet.

‘And now,’ said Michael, ‘come with me into her very presence, and repeat this lie if you dare.’

He suddenly ceased. Remembering the straightforward, honest traditions of Lyn-away men, it flashed through his brain that Martin dared not so belie his name and calling, any more than he possessed the will to conceive so frightful a falsehood as the one of which he now stood accused.

‘*It is true?*’ said Michael, and in these three words was an appeal to the honour, good faith, and to that nameless *esprit de corps* subsisting between Lynaway men, that the man addressed understood to the inmost fibre of his nature.

For a moment there was silence, then the answer came :

‘Ay ! it is true.’

Michael broke into sudden, almost voiceless laughter, as he lifted his hand, and pointed upwards to Ninon’s window.

‘Why do you not go to her ?’ he said. ‘She was your light o’ love once ; let her be your light o’ love again. A marriage ceremony will count for little between such as you and she. Do you hear me ?’ he cried, with the echo of that unnatural

laughter still in his voice, 'go to her and tell her that I sent you, hark you—that I *sent* you, and how I have found out, before it is yet too late, that she stood at the altar with the wrong man to-day ! Tell her, that if but now I could have killed you, and gloried in the deed, that now I thank God that I have not stained my soul with murder for such as she—that what you were to her once, you can now be again, that I thank God there was honesty enough in that vile heart of thine to prevent my taking her, for if she could come to me what she is, she would have betrayed me again afterwards, and it is better now than then. Who was it said that I loved her ? A lie—a lie—the woman I loved was pure as Heaven . . . *she* is dead, the

thing that remains, Martin Strange, is yours, and yours alone.'

Then he turned on his heel, and went away with rapid footsteps through the night.





CHAPTER V.

THE MIDNIGHT SALLY.

THE bride, listening in vain for the sound of Michael's foot on the stair, passed from surprise to doubt, from doubt to fear, from fear to a chill and deadly foreboding of evil, that swept like a dimming, destroying mist between her and the restful perfect happiness she had known since Michael had placed the wedding-ring upon her hand. 'Martin could not have

the heart to do it,' she moaned, her hands clasped, her blue eyes wild with terror, the veil of her rippling hair half hiding, half revealing the beauty of her snowy neck and arms. 'Michael would not believe him,' she said again; 'he would be sure—O yes, he would be sure to come to me and say, "Ninon, and is it—*true?*"'

A thought seemed to strike her, and hastily gathering up her hair, she proceeded to put on her bodice and petticoat, kerchief and shoes; then creeping softly past the room where the servant soundly and audibly slept, she gained the hall door, that was still set open against the return of the master.

As she so stood, hesitating whether she should take the path along which Michael so strangely tarried, she heard voices on

the beach below, and straining her eyes, made out the indistinct outlines of figures moving to and fro—could even catch the occasional gleam of the weapons they carried, as they busied themselves about the boat in their midst. One voice, rising above the rest with startling clearness, made her heart bound in her breast, for even at that distance, could not the ear of love distinguish it as that of her bridegroom, Michael Winter ?

‘ And what will he be doing there ? ’ she thought, her presentiments in no way lessened, for did she not know that the Custom House officers were bent that night on one of those dangerous, nay, desperate errands that had already cost more than one Lyn-away man his life ? And Michael’s being in their midst argued his intention of going

with them. It had come to be understood in the village that no man with others dependent on him, or who was not reckless and over-bold, might take his life in his hand and risk it in these midnight sallies, and not often did one volunteer his services. After all, it was no affair of the village folks ; and if the bold smugglers were resolved to struggle so long and successfully against the law, it did not hurt them, and it was not worth while to be made a dead man of for nothing.

Ninon, passing almost as rapidly as a shadow chased from the hill-side by the sun, fled across the garden and shingle ; but as she drew nearer, saw to her dismay that the boat was already upon the water, that the last man was in the act of leaping

in ; nay, that as she approached, it receded rapidly, although it was as yet so near that she could make out Michael's face among those that filled it.

‘ Michael ! ’ she cried, stretching out her arms towards him, and never heeding how the sea was flowing over her feet and ankles, ‘ are you going away ? will you not then speak to me ? ’

She saw that the rowers shipped their oars, and paused, and in the momentary silence that followed her unexpected appearance heard one man say to another, ‘ Is he mad—to leave her like this on his wedding night ? ’

But Michael sat there like a stone, and said never a word.

‘ Do you go back ? ’ said the one in

authority among them ; ‘ we are late as it is, and there is no time for parleying. Will you be put out, and return with your wife yonder ?’

‘ I have no wife,’ said Michael Winter.

The officer shrugged his shoulders and gave the word of command. He pitied the girl for her beauty’s sake, but business was business, and there was no time to trouble himself about the affair; in another moment the long, swift strokes of the rowers had carried the boat out of earshot.

Ninon stood immovable, heeding nothing but the faint splash of the muffled oars, that almost immediately died away in the distance, gazing as though her life hung upon it, on the shadowy receding outline that stood to her for Michael, her poor pale

lips repeating over and over again, 'I have no wife.' What did it all mean, and why was he leaving her in this terrible fashion? A different parting to this, I wis, had been that of little more than an hour ago had her constant fears borne the bitter fruit of reality at last, and the calamity that she had so passionately striven to avert at last befallen her? Looking down at the water flowing about her feet, a sudden and complete consciousness of the terrible thing that had befallen her came with overwhelming force upon that childish, tender heart, and for one delirious moment her brain reeled; and since her one overmastering thought was that she must get to Michael and implore his forgiveness, it would have been no matter for wonder if

she had thrown herself into the water and met her death while the poor half-crazed brain believed that it was about to compass safety. . . .

Gossiping, ugly old Peter, who had from the distance espied the unusual commotion on the beach, and of course set off post-haste to find out the reason of it, rubbed his eyes on discovering the bride of the morning standing like an image of despair in the sea, and not the smallest sign of Michael, the bridegroom, anywhere about.

‘Mistress Winter, Mistress Winter,’ he cried, ‘what are you doing here, and where is Michael? Oh, fie! have you run away from him to catch your death of cold on your wedding night, and stare yourself mad at the sea?’

‘Michael is gone away,’ she said, slowly and painfully, like a child repeating a lesson it fears to forget, ‘and he did say, before he set out, that I was not his wife.’

‘Hey!’ said Peter, opening both eyes and ears gradually for this delicious and unexpected morsel of scandal, and misled by the calmness of a manner that might well have deceived far wiser men than himself. ‘He said that, did he? Why, the lad must be mad!’

‘I do think it is I who am mad,’ said poor Ninon, pale and cold. ‘Will it be that I have dreamed it, Peter, or was I not married to Michael in the little old church this morning?’

‘Of course you were,’ said Peter, more and more interested, and overjoyed at

getting the story in its integrity, instead of piecemeal, with all the trouble afterwards of dovetailing it into a respectable whole. 'And have you had a quarrel, my dear?' he said, pressing a little nearer and looking into the widely opened fixed blue eyes that were looking far, far beyond him.

'No,' she said, 'there was not ever any quarrel between Michael and me; but do you not know—can you not think to tell me,' she said, laying her slender hand upon the old man's arm, 'why he did go? Will it be that he did meet and have speech with any of the men—with Martin Strange—after he did take me home to-night?'

Peter, looking down on that lovely, imploring young face, felt that out of her own lips was she condemned, and sighed; for

his heart was not a bad one, and he thought he would even forego the luxury of retailing this highly-spiced story, to know that Michael had no good cause for leaving her in this fashion ; to know that, imprudent as she may have been, there was no real harm or disgrace in her past history.

‘I dunno’, he said, drawing his arm away from her touch ; and his voice, all worthless and disreputable though the man was, carried a weight of reprobation that would have fallen heavily enough upon any woman less ignorant of the penalties of evil than Ninon. She did not even observe his manner any more than she had ever noted the questioning looks of the other men and women of the village. There was a curious simplicity and singleness of heart about

the girl that blinded her to many things clear as daylight to every one else.

‘Ye had better go home with ye, Mistress Winter,’ said Peter, not unkindly; ‘the boat will not be back till break o’ day, an’ when ’tis in, Michael ’ull go up to ye yonder, an’ if there’s aught amiss between you, may be ’twill all be set right the morn.’

But in his heart he thought nothing of the kind.

‘At break of day,’ she repeated to herself, monotonously, ‘at break of day.’

‘It cannot be that he will fail to come, Peter?’

‘He’s sure to come,’ said Peter, adding to himself, ‘if so be as he’s not killed as Jack Spiller an’ Tom Masters was last fall.’

Finding that his remonstrances had no

effect upon her, and that nothing would move her from where she stood ; being moreover resolved not to so misuse his advantages as to depart before he had seen the end of this exciting little story, he retired to the shelter of a boat, and fell fast asleep, making night hideous with the resounding echoes of his snores. Ninon sat down on the wet pebbles, crossed her hands on her knees, and waited.

Who shall succeed in portraying the state of a human soul in the moments that immediately follow upon its being stricken by a great calamity ? To say that in the first minutes or even hours after the blow has fallen, intense agony is experienced, would be false ; these come afterwards, and are the result of a certain and absolute recog-

nition of the knowledge that it has at first refused to accept ; rather is the soul in this early stage in a state of confusion, excitement, and horror, fearing all things while accepting none ; therefore, not yet within the grasp of that iron and remorseless hand that will by-and-by dash out the uncertainty and fear, substituting a calm and dispassionate certainty in its place.

Thus Ninon could scarcely be said to suffer ; she was as yet borne up by an intensity of forward out-look that in happier circumstances would have gone by the name of hope. And indeed she must have had a faithful, gentle heart, this poor Ninon, to wait here thus humbly and patiently for the man who had but now treated her with such bitter scorn ; and, in

truth, with her, perfect love had cast out pride, as it does in all purely unselfish women.

The love that can suspend itself, or wax cooler by reason of the neglect or cruelty of the thing it loves, is not worthy of the name of love at all, but may be termed a bastard imitation of the divine passion, being compounded of love of admiration, satisfaction at being adored, and a cold and practical adjustment of the scales on the give-and-take principle, that accords but ill with the whole-heartedness, the lavish abundance of the essence and soul of real love.

Stretched out before her was the great shining path of pearl gradually widening out into space, made by the moon-

beams upon the water, and to Ninon's fancy it looked no phantom track of light, but one along which she might pass in safety, seeking for Michael ; and once when the agony of waiting had risen almost to delirium she advanced towards that treacherous shining, whereupon one who, himself unseen, had for the past hour crouched in the shadow of a boat hard by, half rose as though to snatch her back, but after hesitating a moment she resumed her seat.

'At break of day,' her lips murmured over and over again, as the receding tide whispered and moaned itself farther and farther away from her feet.

The coolness of the midsummer night deepened for the space of a few hours into intense cold. About the same time the

lamps faded out of the sky, the moonlight gradually died away, out yonder in the East the dull-coloured sky took on a clearer, lighter hue, as though the sun while yet a long, long way off sent forth some pale and chilly message of his coming.

It was in this hour, grey and unbeautiful in sky, and land, and sea, that there came over the water six or seven faint and indistinct echoes, yet Ninon instantly recognised them for what they really were, the firing of shots.

These sounds, with their suggestion of violence and danger, gave an altogether new turn to Ninon's thoughts, and for the first time the image of Michael wounded, even killed, passed like lightning before her eyes. All the time that she had been

dreaming of his anger and his despair, his life was perhaps in actual danger ; and now in the swift transition from one over-mastering idea to another, it seemed to her that she cared nothing for his wrath, his scorn, his hatred even, so she could see him return to her, O God, *alive!* It was the old triumph of matter over mind, of things actual over things spiritual, of the danger that menaces the breathing body over the impalpable ills that threaten the mind ; and Ninon, as with all of us who fret and chafe and weary ourselves over trifles until some great catastrophe comes and scatters our puny worries to the winds, found in her healthy, engrossing fears an antidote against those by which she had been so lately possessed.

How long she stood by the edge of the freshening waves she never knew—time was not for her, nor had she any actual existence, until by the light of the now struggling daybreak she discerned a black and distant speck that her leaping heart told her was the home-returning boat. . . . Footsteps sounded beside her, but she heeded them not ; a voice sounded in her ears, the voice of Martin Strange—but it went past her like the foolish cry of a bird at even ; she saw not his haggard, shamed face,—shamed through all its new-found honour of a strong and good resolve,—her life, her soul, her eyes were concentrated on one object—the advancing boat ; among the men who filled it was her husband, alive or—dead ?

The boat came slowly in. It appeared to be heavily laden, and assuredly there was not one man less in it than set out four hours ago ; nay, there even seemed to be more ! And now it is near enough to see their faces, to mark that all are haggard and weary, some of them wounded and splashed with blood, and that at the bottom of the boat lie three or four smugglers bound hand and foot.

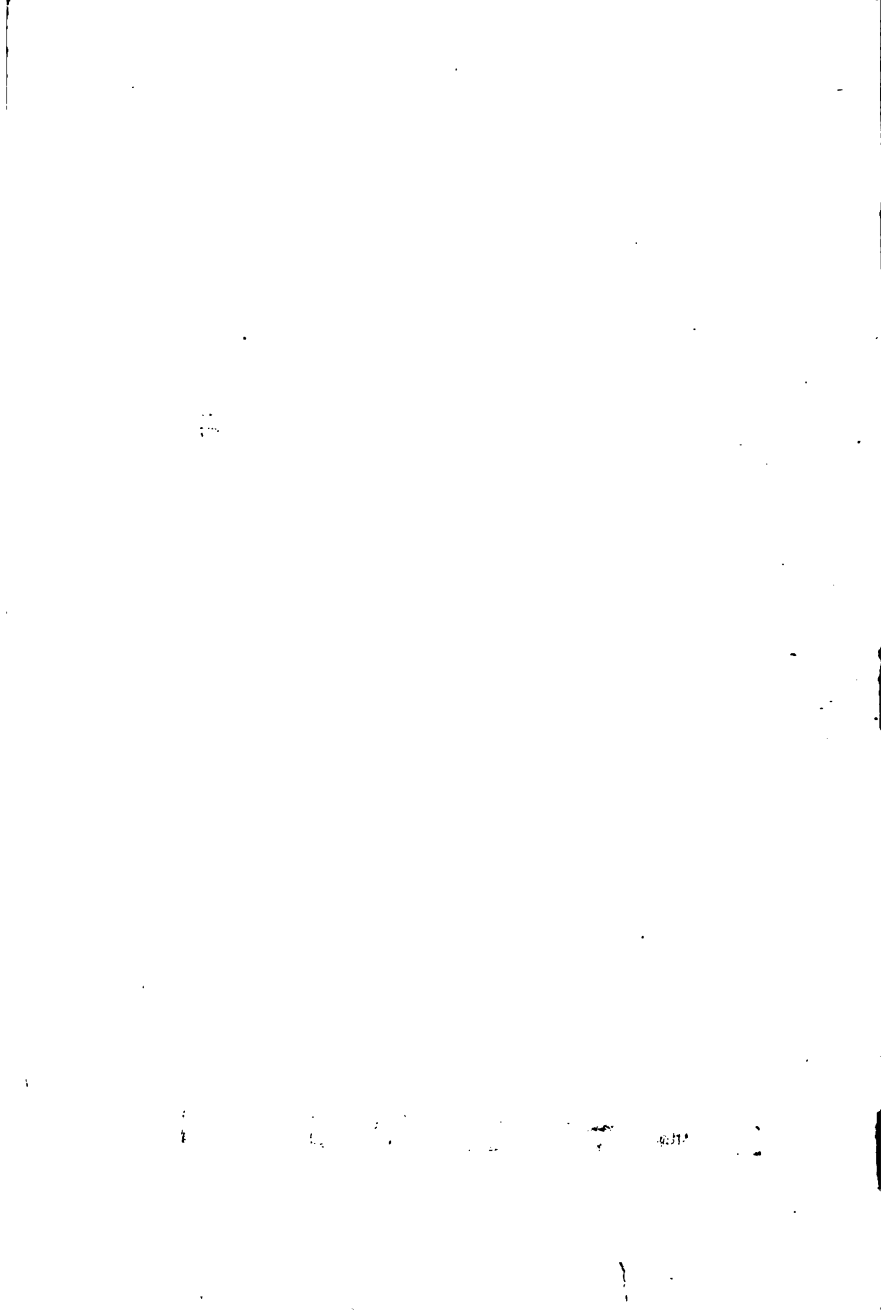
As the keel of the boat grates against the shore, and Peter and Martin catch the ropes flung to them, Ninon, still seeking, seeking among the crowd of faces before her, steps forward, and utters two words :
‘ Michael Winter ? ’

There is a moment’s silence, since it is known to nearly all of those present that

it is Michael's new-made wife who asks the question ; then one of the captured men, his face gashed and bleeding, his right arm broken and hanging by his side, lifting his head, cries with a terrible oath from the place where he lies :

‘ Shot through the breast, woman, an hour ago ; fell overboard and sank like a lump of lead. Serve him well right [an oath], for not staying at home and minding his own business ! ’

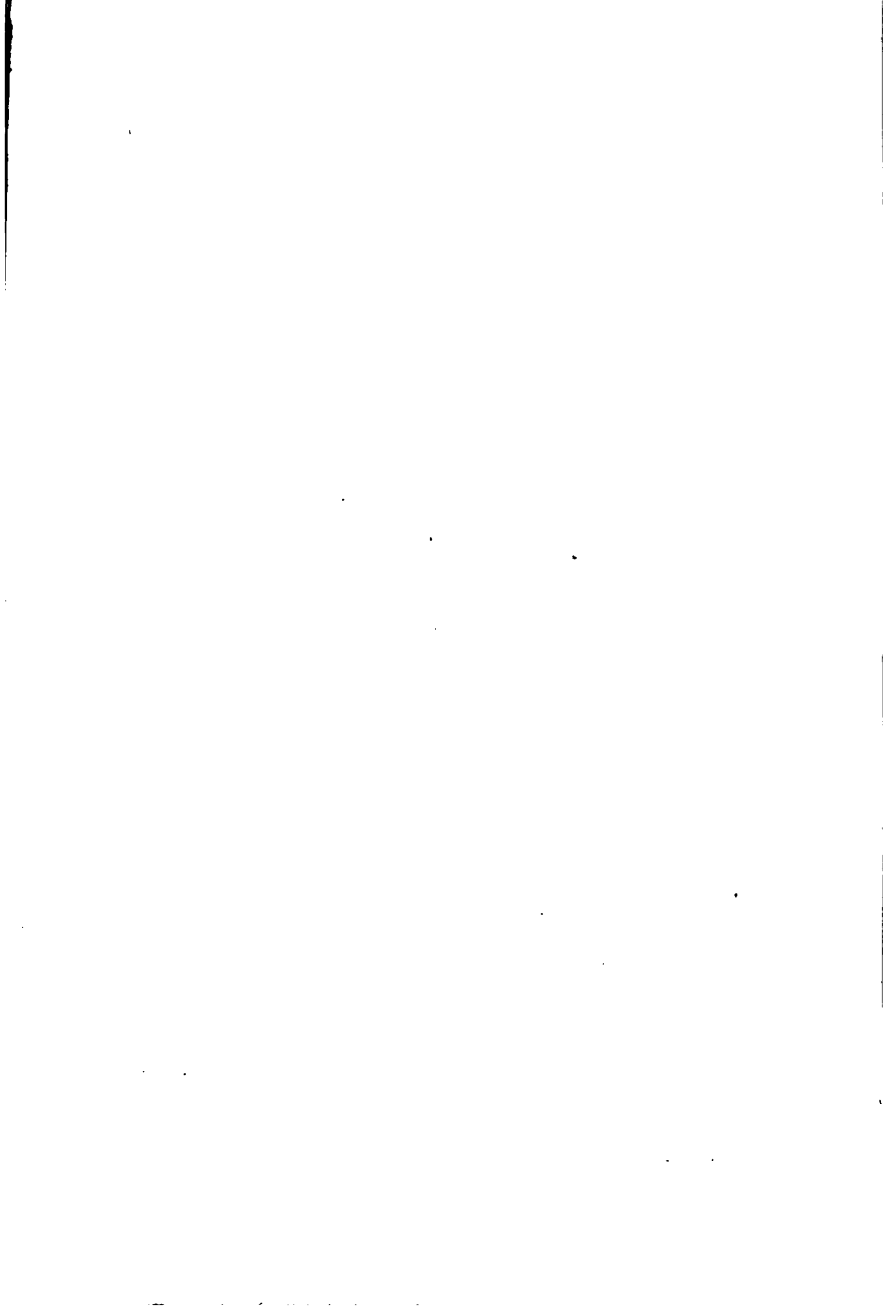






Part II.







CHAPTER I.

TWO YEARS AFTER.

TUSH!’ said Rose, ‘do not speak to her—she does not even see us,’ and stretching out her hand, she softly drew her husband back.

It was Ninon’s slender shape that came fluttering by, seemingly blown on its onward path by the vagabond evening wind, so listless, so shadowy, so irresponsible did

she appear, a mere pale resemblance to the fresh, gay young beauty who had passed this way in all the flush of her careless youth and love but two short years ago.

At her breast and in her hair, she wore a knot of ribbons of the colour that Michael had always loved and praised, yet deemed not half so richly dyed as her beautiful faithful eyes, or one half so soft in their silken gloss as the sweet red lips he had so often kissed . . . and she wore the ribbons still, though praise and blame were surely for ever over-past from the man who lay sepulchred safely in the treacherous bosom of the smiling sparkling sea yonder.

Moving to and fro in her daily life, she

heeded the speech of no man, nor woman either, save one.

A harsh word to her was no more to her than a kind one ; a blow would have moved her no more than a caress ; looks of pity, words of reproof, were alike lost upon her, and naught of either good or evil could touch her in the intense isolation of her soul.

And so it was that they who had loved her not in bygone days, having held her in but light esteem, were moved even to tears by the dumb anguish of her eyes, and after their simple fashion would do her kindly service, and evince in fifty ways their sympathy for her sorrow ; but she heeded them not one whit ; the world to her was full of shadows that came and went, went and came, among which she sought in vain the

living, breathing shape of Michael, her lost love.

It came to pass after a while that the Lynaway folk in looking at, or speaking of her, began to touch the forehead significantly, and to say among themselves that the catastrophe had turned her brain, never a very strong one at the best of times.

What else could be concluded of a woman who had never been seen to shed a single tear, or heard to utter a syllable concerning her loss to any living creature ; who refused to believe that a dead man was in very truth dead, but spent half her days and nights in watching by the sea-shore for his return, and who would not wear a vestige of mourning in honour of his memory, but

dressed herself always in the colours that he had preferred, so that she might be fair in his eyes at whatever moment he might appear ?

And as time went by, and growing weary (as do all people) of bestowing pity where it is not returned in the small change of gratitude and confidence, they came to believe more and more in the fact of her wits being astray, and less and less in the intense reality and depth of her suffering. They could not understand the existence of anything, whether of joy or sorrow, that had no outward form of expression, since their own experiences had never been anything out of the common way ; they did not know that supreme suffering is reticent—nay, that when it shall

have reached its extremest limits it is absolutely silent, and incapable of words or complaint.

He who can express his agony with suitable force and vigour in the form of words most adapted to display its strength, retains too much the mastery over his own emotions, is too little abandoned to the fury of them, to be regarded as a truthful and natural exponent of human pain . . . the extremity of anguish is dumb, since speech is inadequate to it . . . while the inarticulate sounds that may be heard proceeding from a soul in travail, and that form the only true and actual language of woe, carry in their uncouth strangeness, a meaning that no actual words, however well chosen and aptly uttered, can boast.

‘See,’ said Rose, and her voice was still hushed, though Ninon was far out of hearing, ‘she is going to the old place at the edge of the sea, and from a distance Martin follows her. She will sit quite still staring at the sea for hours, and Martin from a little way off will watch her just like a dog ! He will stir neither hand nor foot, until she does, when he will follow her home, not daring to approach or speak to her. Hark you, Enoch, it lies upon me sometimes like a chill, that some night or morning we shall find them sitting there, her body still looking for Michael, as Martin’s will be keeping watch over her, but their spirits *gone !*’

She shivered and pressed more closely to her the little sleeping babe that lay like a

flower on her breast, Enoch's child and hers. The touch of those rosy tender lips had smoothed the greater part of the bitterness out of her heart ; the aching void that she had thought no love save Michael's could ever fill was empty no longer, for the child had crept into and filled it, drawing father and mother together as the former never guessed, who knew not how far away from him Rose had been in the days when he had deemed her most truly and entirely his own.

Passionately as Rose had wept for Michael's sudden and violent death, her grief had been tempered (ignobly enough) by the thought that he was now lost for ever to her rival Ninon.

One might have imagined that the poor

girl's miserable fate would soften Rose's heart to her, but with that curious dislike which one woman can retain for another long after the man who caused it is dead or forgiven, she could not pardon her for having once possessed Michael's love. Excusing herself to her own heart, she said that Ninon's wrong-doing did but bring its own punishment; that at her door, and hers alone, lay Michael's death; and that no amount of after suffering or shame could atone for her past misconduct. Nevertheless, like most women who are unpitying in their conclusions, she could not bear to see with equanimity the working out of the doom, and often with a half-hearted pity would rise from her bed at night to see if the lone watcher held her accustomed

vigil, would often pause by day to speak some kindly words that might have been the harshest upbraiding for aught that Ninon knew or cared.

Enoch's eyes, following his wife's, rested, with fear and trouble in them, upon the girl concerning whom Michael Winter had asked him such a terrible question just two years ago.

'Poor lass!' he said, 'to see her as she looks this day, an' to mind what she was when Michael luv'd her! 'Twill iver be in my thoughts that I might ha' bin more quick that night, an' not let him see I had my doubts about her, but afore I could tell him I thought she'd been no more nor a bit giddy, he was gone.'

His eyes turned back from that lonely

figure on the beach below, to the wife and child beside him, and the contrast of his own happiness with the fate of Michael, whom he had so dearly loved, smote him with a more than usual sharpness . . . the sweet of his own life as set against the bitterness of that other ending often seemed to him as a cruel disloyalty to his lost friend . . . such faithful thoughts have true friends one to the other when united in the bonds of an affection that death itself cannot break.

‘’Twas not you that did the mischief,’ said Rose, her cheek turning pale ; ‘ Michael had speech with Martin Strange that night—one of the men swears that he saw them standing on the plot before Michael’s cottage together, though nobody

knows what passed—nobody ever will know.'

'If Martin spoke agen the girl after she was Michael's wedded wife 'twas a coward's trick, an' a shameful thing to do,' said Enoch, his features kindling with indignation. 'If he'd got aught to say agen her he oughter ha' spoke up afore the ring was on her finger; a true man 'ud ha' bitten his tongue out afore he'd spoke after.'

'But supposing,' said Rose, looking downward, 'that Martin had not meant to speak, that he had made up his mind (although he loved her so madly) not to stand between her and Michael—would he have been so bad and cowardly then, Enoch?'

‘Not if he had kept to ’t; but that it ’pears he didn’t do, my dear.’

‘And I have been thinking,’ said Rose, still looking downwards, ‘that perhaps he was not so bad as we thought—that having found him that night, Michael compelled him to tell the whole truth—and if so, Martin wouldn’t have been so much to blame.’

‘He might ha’ saved the lass’s credit, I’m thinkin’, if he’d had a mind,’ said Enoch, ‘for in spite o’ their bein’, as folks said, lovers, an’ there bein’ scandal about the girl, I niver will believe that there was real harm in it, or more than a girl’s bit folly, for she has an innercent face o’ her own, my dear, an’ a look in it that I never saw on a sinfu’ one yet.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Rose, ‘it must have been something more than folly to drive Michael away from her like that, and to make him say to her, before all the men—that he had no wife !’

‘Ay,’ said Enoch, ‘there’s no denying that Michael went away full o’ the belief that she had wronged him, but I shall allers think he might ha’ given the girl a chance o’ clearin’ herself; an’ mark you, Rose, there has been known sich things as a man tellin’ a lie to prevent another man from gettin’ the girl he loves; an’ who’s to tell if when Michael asked Martin for the truth, that bein’ so tempted, and mad wi’ love and despair, he didn’t forget his honour an’ his God, an’ foul his lips wi’ a black lie?’

‘But what made you ever think of such a thing?’ cried Rose, thoroughly startled, for such words as these had never before fallen from her husband’s lips. ‘What reason can you have for thinking it, Enoch?’

‘Do ye not see for yerself,’ he said, ‘the change that has come to the man? Ay, and that began about the time Michael come home an’ began to court Ninon. From bein’ a merry outspoken chap, wi’ his heart on his sleeve, so as all might see it, he have come by bits to be a downcast, miserable-lookin’ creature, avoidin’ everybody, an’ seemin’ to have sich a bad opinion o’ himself as other folks can’t choose but have the same o’ him themselves. Now, it takes summut more’n

common trouble to bring a man to that state, an' 'tis not in natur' for him as is sound in heart an' conscience to become sich a poor thing—an' for no visible reason whatsumdever. If he'd been Ninon's honest lover an' give her up, or fought for her like a man when he found Michael luv'd her, why he'd have had naught to reproach himself wi' when Michael died, an' be free now to try his luck wi' her again ; 'stead o' which he jest follows her about like a dog, seemin' not to expect a word or a look, an' that's not the way a man as respec's himself tries to win a good lass's love, my dear.'

'That is true,' said Rose thoughtfully, 'and if it should be that 'twas as you think, then 'tis accounted for that Martin, who

stood on the shore when the boat came in without Michael, should have gone on like a madman, saying that 'twas impossible Michael was dead, that it must be all a mistake ; and then, when they'd convinced him, did he not fling himself on the ground at Ninon's feet imploring her forgiveness, she never heeding him any more than if he had been a stone ?

‘ If iver,’ said Enoch sternly, ‘ through bein’ lonely, or in want of somebody to care for, an’ set store by her, she should give her promise to Martin, ’tis a worse opinion than I’ve ever had o’ the girl afore that I should have that day.’

‘ Some of the gossips persist in it she’ll marry him sooner or later,’ said Rose ; ‘ but I don’t think so myself. Did you see

how, when that old fool Peter said to her the other day, "'Tis no good crying over spilt milk for ever, Ninon, and nobody knows better than yourself that you can take a new husband whenever you please," how she turned upon him with all the vacant look gone out of her pale face, and a horror in it as though some creeping ugly thing had come anigh her?

''Tis plain she's got some reason for misliking him,' said Enoch, 'though she's too gentle and heart-broken to rail at him or speak her mind, for there never was any strength in the lass save in her great love for Michael. But that she guesses what passed atween the two that night I have niver had a doubt.'

Martha Nichol came hurrying along,

with intelligence of some sort written on her plain, hard-featured, yet not unkindly face.

‘Hester Winter is dying,’ she said, ‘and I’ve come to fetch Ninon.’

And she sped on with her message of death to the quiet figure by the sea-shore.





CHAPTER II.

THE LAST FRIEND.

THE bushes of white and red roses had blossomed once, and faded twice since the day of Michael's marriage, and the time of their second flowering was even now, as Ninon passed slowly through them to her home.

She heeded not their saucy pride of beauty and fragrance, nor ever plucked one for gladness at the sight or scent of it;

they were to her as insignificant portions of the cruel and heartless whole that all animate and inanimate creation made to her now, that seemed to have forgotten her darling as utterly as though he had never existed. She wondered sometimes in her silent helpless fashion if, after all, she herself were unnatural and strange in thus *remembering*, when it was apparently in the nature of all things living to forget.

Even his mother wept no longer for her only son now that before her eyes the gates of the Eternal City were opening more widely day by day, since in the looked-for rapture of that expected greeting, no tears of earthly tribulation might dare intrude. Only upon the joy and gladness of her

going fell the shadow of poor desolate Ninon, whom she was leaving friendless and alone, possessed, moreover, by a wild and fallacious hope that could not but be productive of bitter disappointment in the future, as well as of feverish unrest in the present.

It was strange in how different a fashion these two women, united in the bonds of an intense love for Michael, looked forward to again being restored to him. To one, death was to give back her treasure ; to the other, the reaper was as a frightful enemy who had power to rend from her the fulfilment of a desire that filled her to the exclusion of every other idea, thought, or wish ; for what if Michael returned to find her dead, and the words lying for ever

dumb upon her lips that she but lived to speak ? Would not the day of intercession have gone by for ever, while to the end of all time would he not believe that she had deceived him ?

That he was not dead she was very sure ; he breathed not one air, she another. Her very flesh (she thought) must have crumbled to dust had *his* gone down to the grave or the deep, and there was justice neither in heaven nor on earth, if God permitted her to die before he had returned.

And so she watched for him always—in dead of night, at break of day, in heat of noon, and cool of even—and sooner or later, perhaps not for a long, long while—not until her wits had departed, and she lay

a-dying—she would hear the sound of his foot on the stair, and he would take her in his arms once again, knowing her at last for the innocent, faithful Ninon that he had loved so well.

Her faith was so intense, her patience so absolute, that these two past years of waiting were but a small matter to her, and in no way made her fearful or doubtful of his ultimate return. And so that he might never feel that he was shut out from his home, the house-door stood open night and day, summer and winter ; and from the chamber window shone a lamp to guide his footsteps should the time of his coming be after the sun had set. His hat and coat still hung in the hall ; in the corner where he had been wont to sit of evenings was

set his favourite chair; and upon a little table hard by was laid an open book, with a sprig of lavender on the page, as though at any moment he might walk in and continue his reading where he had left it off.

At all of which foolish, loving tokens of what she deemed to be a sad and pitiful craze, Hester never murmured, trusting in time, and the inevitable certainty it must bring, to convince the girl of the irreparable nature of her loss.

The way in which it befell that Ninon and Hester Winter had come to dwell together was in this wise: it had reached the ears of the mother, following quickly on the news of her son's death, how that Mrs. Levesque, cold-hearted yet passionate,

and resenting with all the weakness of a cowardly nature the disgrace that Ninon had brought upon herself and home, had in her fury spoken bad and cruel words to the silent and despairing girl, and, bidding her return never again to the threshold to which she had brought but shame and scandal, had thrust her from the door.

Whereupon Ninon, scarce hearing her, and all unmoved, had returned to the spot whence Enoch had led her away half an hour ago, and resumed the stony tearless gaze at the water that held (they told her) the body that yesterday was her joyous, loving bridegroom.

Then it was that Hester, all stiff and tired as she was with her sixty-five years

of toil and trouble, arose and went to her, and asking no questions, uttering no reproaches, moved to a very passion of pity by that young and terrible face, received the girl into her loving trust and affection, and this I think she would not have done had she not found something in her, invisible to all the rest, that satisfied her own spotless mind ; for who shall deny that there exists a freemasonry between the pure in heart, as between those that are corrupt and vile ? With the one as with the other, speech is not necessary for a perfect understanding. And so, in the house that had been Michael's, but now was by the law Ninon's, they lived together in perfect love and friendship.

It had chanced very soon after Michael's

death, that an old man who had been good to Ninon when she lived in Bayonne, died, and bequeathed to her so much money as sufficed amply for the simple wants of the daughter and mother-in-law.

Mrs. Levesque, oppressed, for all her coldness, by the undisguised scorn and contempt of the Lynaway folk, had long ago departed to her husband's people; so that Ninon was utterly alone save for one friend, and this, the last, and (after Michael) the best, was even now hurrying away from the girl with a willing gladness that with her slow, dull heart she sought to understand, yet could not . . . already upon Hester's faded brow and lips had come the light that never shines on mortal face unless

reflected from the sun of the kingdom of Heaven, already the voices of those around her sounded far away and indistinct, as the finer, spiritual ear opened and the gross and bodily one grew dull . . already love, pity, memory even, were fading out in the full glory of that new and perfect existence that to some happy few begins before the soul has taken actual wing, enabling it to pass from life to immortality without any conscious and painful pause at the intermediate stage of death . . and Ninon, entering from her daily piteous pilgrimage, turned colder and paler as she saw that many faces closed round the bed upon which her mother lay, as she heard many voices whispering the one word that will so certainly be spoken of us all some day, and

drawing nearer, saw with only an added oppression at her numb heart, that Hester was already almost beyond the reach of human voice or prayer.

‘Mother,’ she said, kneeling down beside her, ‘are you too going from me away, as Michael did — without one word?’

Her voice, scarce higher than a whisper, yet seemed to have power to call back the spirit that hovered on the very threshold of its departure; a human, tender look replaced the unspeakable rapture in Hester’s open eyes, a smile played for a moment about her lips, the hand that Ninon held, stirred with ever so faint and tremulous a motion.

‘Your love . . .’ she said, ‘your faithfu’

love to Michael . . I'll no forget.' . . .
Then, it being about five of the clock and
she so ready and willing to go, the pale
king touched her gently on the heart, and
she departed.





CHAPTER III.

AT THE SIGN OF THE 'GOLDEN APPLE.'



STREAM of light poured through the narrow casement of the modest parlour set aside by mine host for such of his customers as could afford to pay for the luxury of smoking their pipes and drinking their grog in more comfort than that which was afforded by the public bar.

On the particular evening of which we

write, the room contained two occupants only, Stephen Prentice and William Marly.

Each being provided with a full glass and a churchwarden pipe, they presented the solemnly satisfied appearance of men who, having reached the acme of comfort and bodily ease, are yet agreeably aware of being in the full possession of their faculties, and quite equal to discussing the affairs of this or any other nation with sagacity, skill, and considerable credit to themselves. A different thing this, and in no way to be confounded with, the objectless garrulity of the man whose tongue waxes loose in proportion as the consciousness of the loss of his self-mastery demoralises him. For, let the unwise assert what they will of the

thoughtless readiness with which men exceed the bounds of moderation, I will aver that none save an habitual drunkard ever crosses the boundary that divides moderation from excess, without a passing twinge or thought of self-condemnation, though it is partly the loss of his self-respect that impels him still farther on his brutish way.

The fact that most men have an inveterate tendency to lie in their cups is, in the teeth of that false old proverb '*In vino veritas*,' a sufficiently established fact. When the key of the tongue is lost, and the portals of the imagination are left unguarded, commonplace Truth appears to the rosy dreams of the revellers as too sober and dull a deity to compel their alle-

giance, and abandoning themselves to Fancy, they play all manner of frolics under her fickle guidance, although even as a person's disposition and true character will come out more clearly under the influence of wine than any other known test, whether of prosperity, adversity, or mental suffering, the peculiar bent of his false speaking will frequently be a key to the idiosyncrasies of his mind.

Betrayed into this digression by the desire of making patent, to all whom it may concern, that though sufficiently elevated to be more than usually talkative, Stephen Prentice and William Marly might yet be trusted to speak truth if they chose, and only falsehood if they deliberately willed it, let us listen to their conversation as it

floats audibly enough through the open window, although there is only the sea, as they suppose, to hear it.

‘Reckon you wasn’t here last night, Bill, when Martin Strange come in?’ said Stephen, a big broad-shouldered man, with a good expression of countenance, filling his pipe slowly as he spoke.

‘No, but I heerd on’t. Queer, an’ no mistake.’

Stephen nodded.

‘There was a deal o’ noise an’ talkin’ goin’ on,’ he said ‘when in come Martin, as white as a sheet, his eyes burnin’ like coals, an’ down he dashes his money; an’ says he: “The best you’ve got, master, and plenty o’t, too, for the prattiest lass in Lyn-away’s give her word to take me for her

husband at last!" Everybody stared at him ; some thought he was drunk, but he worn't, he was just mad wi' joy. He looked roun'd at us all as if he was waitin' for us to wish 'im good luck, but nobody sed a word, an' it seemed onnatral and unkind, seein' what a favourite he used to be wi' us all, an' that not so long ago. But old Peter, whose tongue can't help wagging in an' out o' season, called out : " An' if so be as she *do* mean to marry you, Martin Strange, I'm thinkin' 'twould have saved a deal o' trouble if she'd made up her mind as well fust as larst." Upon which Martin bade him hold his tongue for a block-head, an' swaggered out again. Some believed 'un, some didn't, but all 'greed as they hadn't thought it o' Ninon,

seein' how faithful she'd allers seemed to Michael.'

Something—it might be but the breath of the evening wind, or the flight of some vagrant animal across the withered September leaves—stirred without in the darkness, unnoticed by either of the men who sat within.

'Old Peter was about right,' said William Marly, speaking slowly and with grave deliberation; 'if it is to be, then 'tis a pity it wasn't at fust instead of *at larst*.'

'There I don't agree with ye,' said Stephen, with spirit, 'an' I don't mind laying anythin' reasonable upon it, that Ninon niver marries Martin Strange fust *or larst* !'

'Then ye think he was tellin' a lie last night?' said William, stolidly. 'An', if I might ax the question, what call should he have for to do that?'

'P'r'aps he deceived himself, or Ninon didn't make the matter plain to 'im; but that she give 'im her word I niver will believe.'

'Her makin' up her mind to marry him,' said William, overlooking Stephen's last remark, 'shows her to be a young woman o' sense; an' that I niver have reckoned her till now. When a female gets her name mixed up with a man's in folks' mouths, whether she fancies him or whether she don't, there's only one respec'able course open to that female; she ought to marry him. And if not at fust, why then do it

at larst, an' with the best grace you can, says I.'

'People had no call to be allers couplin' their names together as they did,' said Stephen, settling himself more comfortably in his chair to argue the matter out, 'seein' how they was kind o' cousins, an' she with no brothers nor sisters, nothin' but that cross ill-natured mother o' hers to speak to. An' as to luv'in' Martin, why she niver luv'd nothin' nor nobody till she saw Michael. I mind it as if 'twas yesterday, how when Michael come back, jest as he set foot on shore, he looked up an' saw Ninon standin' up like a flower in the sunshine, wi' the light shinin' on the red o' her lips an' the gowld o' her hair, an' how he jest kep' on' lookin'—lookin', seein' none o'

us, an' we all knew how 'twould be, without tellin.'

'She ought to ha' kep' to Martin,' said William, who, whenever he found out a text for himself, always stuck to it like a man. 'A lot o' courting as don't lead to nothin', ain't iver no credit to the man nor the maid, an' there was circumstances in this perticler case as made it desirable as they should marry ; an' nobody's better aweer o' that fact than you, Stephen Prentice.'

'As to them succumstances, as you calls 'em,' said Stephen ' (though in my 'pinion you might ha' found a rayther shorter word ; but there, you was always sich a chap for showin' yer bit o' eddication), I ha' been thinkin' lately as how p'r'aps we was

all too ready to think evil o' that matter as we knows on, an' that there mit ha' been another side to't, as 'ud make all the difference. Many a gal who's a bit foolish afore she's married makes a good wife arterwards.'

'Twasn't a question o' foolishness,' said William, solemnly, 'but o' character. A gal may be foolish up to a certain pint, Stephen, but beyond that pint she can't go without getting blown upon. An' p'raps you won't be after denying that for a young lass to go off wi' a man from twelve o' the clock one day, to five o' the same the next, ain't exac'ly the kind o' conduc' as one could wish to see in one's sister or daughter (if a person happened to ha' got one). An' if there was another side to the tale, 'twas mighty strange as nobody ever

heerd on it, neither from Martin, or the gal, or her mother, but people was jest let to think what they pleased—an' it's a failing o' human natur' that when it's axed to believe either good or bad o' a matter, having it left to its own conscience so to speak, it ginerally—I may say, always—believes the bad.'

'Because human natur's got a nasty way o' its own in a good many respects,' said Stephen, 'ain't no reason why we should have it too, an' I shall allers say that I b'lieve Ninon were good, for all that 'pearances was so dead agen her. An' seein' how careful you was to stand by her, William, an' how you dared Peter iver to say a word, an' couldn't ha' done more to save Ninon's credit if she'd ha' bin yer own

sister, why it have always surprised me that ye should ha' got sich a bad opinion o' her ; she worn't worth all that trouble if she was what you think.'

'Stephen,' said William, with deliberation, 'you're a good-hearted chap, but you can't argify—it ain't in your line. When I did what I could for Ninon, 'twas 'cause I reckoned her but young an' heedless, and that if as how there was harm anywhere, 'twas Martin's fault, not hers, he bein' so much older and more knowledgable. Being over soft-hearted an' a bit foolish about the girl myself, I couldn't abide as she should be the talk o' the place and picked to pieces by the women, so, as you mind, we jest agreed to hold our tongues, and frightened that old fool Peter

into holding his, though I'm much mistook if he didn't drop a word here an' a word there, else how was it that folks began for to look queer at her, an' the women to nod and whisper when she was passing by? S'posing as how she was going to be Martin's wife sooner or later, I say I was minded to shield her; but arterwards, when I saw as she an' Michael meant courting, I took a bad opinion o' her, and had a mind to warn him; but 'tis thankless work coming betwixt a man an' his sweetheart, so I let the matter bide. Then they was married, and we all know the ugly end o' it; for I can't but think it must ha' been something mortal bad to drive him away from her that night, so deep in love with her as he was

an' all; but it didn't surprise me, an', if you mind, I sed to ye as we was coming home from the feast——'

'Ay!' said Stephen, eagerly; 'an' d'ye know, William, it have bin on my mind iver since that 'twas that same speech o' yours as made all the mischief that night? He must ha' heard or been told summit to go off like that, an' you an' I was the only two as knowed anythin' to lay real hold on agen the girl. Rose Nichol 'ud ha' told him like a shot if she'd a knowed; she were allers that jealous o' Ninon, an' Enoch, being sich frends wi' him, might ha' spoke, thinkin' it his duty, but he didn't know it; an' Peter, he wouldn't ha' dared, bein' sich a coward; so I'm thinkin' it must ha' bin you an' me

as did the harm, a pair o' fools as we was I'

William Marly, grown a little pale, and with some of his high manner gone, took a long pull at his glass before making reply.

'What we said didn't go for nothing,' he said at last, 'leastways it wouldn't have if it hadn't been true. An' if there was any explanation to be give of that slip o' Ninon's wi' Martin, why couldn't she ha' told Michael the rights of it, an' then, if he did hear stories, he could ha' given them the lie? Facks is facks, turn em' inside out as you may, and I can't but think as Ninon couldn't give a right account o' that business, or she 'ud ha' done it to Michael. Lord! it seems but yes-

terday I saw her standing at her mother's door, dressed so pretty an' smart, an' says she to me: "I'm going to Marmot this afternoon, William, to see the peep-show an' all the sights with Martin, an' we shall have to step out brisk, an' no mistake, if we want to get home before dark." Only she didn't say it like that, but in her funny, forrin fashion, an' I said to her, liking to stop an' talk just for the pleasure o' looking at her: "I s'pose ye feel very happy, my dear, as you're going along wi' Martin?" She looked up at me wi'out a bit o' a blush or even a smile to show as she understood, an' said: "I'd rather ha' gone wi' Rose an' Enoch to-morrow, but Martin was so set upon takin' me to-day." An' as I knew she was always a bit too

ready to give up her own way to other people, if by so doing she could please 'em, I sed: "Ah! you'll get a better will o' your own some day," thinking of when she'd be married to Martin; for though it's possible to find a sweetheart wi'out a temper o' her own, where will ye find, from one end o' the world to t'other, a wife as hasn't that same? Jest then Martin came along, and they went away together.'

William paused, and again there was that faint sound without, too vague, too much like the moaning of the sea, to attract the attention of those who talked.

'About five o' the next morning, it bein' foggy and raw for all that 'twas in the month of March, an' you an' me going

down to the boats, it give us a turn to come face to face wi' Ninon an' Martin, she in all her bits of finery as I'd seen her in the day before, he in all his Sunday best, an' they both comin' along the way as led from Marmot.'

'The same path 'ud ha' brought 'em from the rocks,' said Stephen doggedly, 'an' if they'd come by the short cut from Marmot they might well ha' got caught by the tide ; an' if so, wi' the fog and all, they might ha' been hours there through no fault o' theirs. It wouldn't ha' bin the fust time a Lynaway man has got served that fashion.'

'A tipsy Lynaway man, ye mean,' said William Marly, 'not a sober one. An' d'ye think Martin don't know well enough

how the tides go? If they come back the beach way that night, Martin at least knowed what he was about an' ought to ha' been ashamed to bring her; besides, couldn't he ha' spoke out like a man an' explained it, an' then nobody would have gone for to say a word?

'Martin didn't come well out o' it,' said Stephen, shaking his head; 'he must ha' known reports got about, an' yet he wouldn't say nothing one way or t'other. When that old Peter went ferretin' about an' got hold o' a bit o' the matter, Martin ought to ha' spoke out an' cleared the girl somehow, even if he had to tell a big lie or two to do it. Though I niver will believe but that she were good an' honest, an' it comes often to my mind how that mornin'

when we flashed the lantern on their faces, she didn't seem any ways ashamed or put out at meetin' us, but called out in her gay, innercent way, "Good-mornin' to you, Stephen Prentice an' William Marly, an' is it not a bad an' frightful fog?" an' seemed to be goin' to say somethin' more, but Martin, who seemed as mad as mad to ha' met us, pulled her away afore she could say another word; p'raps he thought we should s'pose they'd bin walkin' out early in the mornin', not knowin' they'd bin to Marmot over night. Now, if she'd bin guilty o' wrong-doing an' her conscience had bin sore, she niver could ha' looked at us that way or spoke as she did that mornin'. An' afterwards when I met her agin, there worn't a sign o' trouble in

her face ; ony, after Michael come, looked at me piteous-like once or twice as if she was sayin', " Don't tell Michael—don't tell Michael "—but that same trouble allers seemed to me to be Martin's doin', for jest at the first she was as happy as a bird wi'out a thought o' a mistake o' any kind upon her mind ; 'twas ony arter she'd promised Michael that she got to look so pale an' frightened.'

' If Martin threatened her,' said William slowly, ' havin' a sartin hold upon her, 'twas a bad, cowardly thing to do, an' not one as Ninon or any other girl with a sperrit 'ud be likely to get over, so I can't b'lieve he ever did, or she'd niver have made up her mind to take him now. An' mind you, he's always loved her from first

to last, so, seein' as how Michael's dead an' gone, an' anything 'ud be better for the poor lass than the life she's bin living, why let's drink, mate, to the health of Martin Strange and his wife as is to be—Ninon !'

Something or somebody without uttered a low exclamation that made the two men turn and glance simultaneously towards the window.

'Who goes there ?' cried William Marly, starting up, angry as men usually are when disagreeably surprised, and cursing himself for a fool to have been talking with such freedom by an open window. Leaning far out of the casement and repeating his question still more impatiently, there passed out of the darkness

into the light, from the light merged itself imperceptibly again into the darkness, the face, pale and angry, and contorted by a bleak look of menace and despair, of Ninon Winter's lost bridegroom, Michael.





CHAPTER IV.

PART OF THE TRUTH.

THROUGH the September night, the lamp set high in Ninon's chamber shone like a beacon before the eyes of two men who approached the cottage from totally opposite directions.

The footfall of the one, uneven, rapid, and impatient, suggested a person dominated by a strong though irresolute impulse: that of the other, in its steady,

almost noiseless on-coming, seemed to possess to the ear of the close observer a relentless purpose by no means likely to be baulked of its fulfilment.

Martin Strange, for to him belonged the wavering, hasty step, crossing the narrow grass plot of which mention has been made, came to the open house-door at the very moment when Ninon, bearing a light in her hand, appeared at the top of the stairs, and slowly began to descend them.

Simultaneously a man entered the garden, and passing without sound over the grass, halted by the beech tree that as nearly as possible faced the entrance to the cottage.

Advancing to the door, and not perceiving Martin, who, obeying some inexplic-

able instinct, had drawn back into the shadow of the rose-bush, Ninon raised the lamp above her head, and gazed intently before her in the direction of the sea.

She wore a white gown of some clinging stuff that followed the curves of her lovely, youthful shape, brightened at breast and elbow with blue, and the light being fully concentrated upon her, she shone out from the darkness like a living picture framed in ebony. All used as had once been both the watchers to her beauty, it now came upon them alike as a pure fresh surprise, as are mostly those choice and delicate gifts of God that come to us now and again in the stress and turmoil of our passionate, struggling lives.

The girl's tender, innocent lips parted,

and the words that she uttered floated out like a caress on the evening air.

‘To-night,’ she said, ‘and will he not come to-night? my heart’s delight my dearest’ The thought stirring so sweetly at her heart, shone through her eyes until they grew bright and clear as stars, her pale cheeks glowed to the richness of a damask rose: in one magic moment she compassed again the freshness of her youth, the undimmed splendour of her girlish beauty, and whereas a few moments ago she had in her pallor appeared unsurpassable, there was between now and then, the difference of a flower irradiated by vivifying sunshine, and the same when from it is withdrawn colour, and light, and warmth.

Martin Strange, beholding her face, hearkening to her words with a dizzy, unreal sense of amazement and rapture, stepped out of the shadow, and appeared suddenly before her.

What was the word that broke from her lips like a living thing of joy, and that made him recoil before her as though she had stricken him to the heart, while that other listener yonder, creeps a step nearer, asking himself if his brain has turned, and his senses have in good sooth left him at last ?

‘No,’ said Martin Strange, ‘it is not Michael.’

In the poor wretch’s voice was the utter negation of despair, and the *ignis fatuus* of hope, after whose gleam, now bright, now pale, he had danced so long and through

such deep and miry paths of dishonour, died out at once and for ever, in the very moment that the cup so passionately longed for, so long and patiently compassed, at last seemed to be within his very grasp.

‘Ninon,’ he said, and his voice sounded stale and worthless even in his own ears, ‘have ye forgot how yesterday, ’twas but yesterday, you hearkened to my suit, an’ didn’t give me nay when I said as how I reckon’d you’d give me your promise to be my wife?’

‘No,’ said Ninon, pale and wan, ‘you did ask me, but I did say nor yes nor no, for by this time you shall have known, O yes, you shall well have known, that not any other reply could I give you ever ; and

if you did think that because I said not no to you, I did mean yes, you were then altogether deceiving yourself. For if I could not find the words to speak, it was because I was in my heart so sorry that you should to me have been so bad a friend.'

'So bad a friend?' he repeated, faltering, 'an' how could I iver be that to you, Ninon, when I've always loved you so despritly?'

'You did mislead me,' she said, and her voice was very calm and quiet. 'I am not so young and foolish now as I did use to be, and I do see it all now, and cannot help but for to despise you.'

A bat, whirling with sudden violence against the lamp Ninon held, extinguished

the flame, so that the darkness swallowed up the sweet sorrowful beauty of her face, and the haggard shamed misery of his.

‘And to me it does not seem ever that you did truly love me,’ she went on. ‘Michael, he did love me, but not you, or you would not to me have brought so great misfortunes. When first I did come to Lynaway you was kind and good to me always, but after we did go to Marmot, ah!’ she cried, breaking off suddenly, ‘that night so fatal and unhappy! you did change to me, and when Michael came and loved me, you did make my life a bad thing to me day by day, so that I was in fear always, for you did say to me, “And if you will not love and marry me I will to all people tell the story of Marmot,

and to you no one will ever speak again if it shall be known, the least of all Michael Winter, who is your shadow always." And I did believe you, because you were to me so old and wise, and I did know nothing of your English ways and thoughts, although to me it did seem strange why Michael or any one or other person should be angry with me for what was not never any fault of mine ; but oh ! I did love him so with all my heart that it was to me as death that he should scorn and convey himself away from me, and as you did say to me always, " If to his ears shall reach one word he will go away, and you will see his face no more," my life to me was one fear, from the one day to the other,'

For a moment she paused, then the soft voice went bravely on again.

‘On the evening before my wedding that-was-to-be, you did follow me to the ruins of the old chapel and say : “Ninon, it is but a fancy you have in your heart for Michael ; to me belongs your love, since you did love me before he came ; and will you not come away with me this night, and I will be faithful and good to you always ?” But I did say : “No—it is not so, you was my friend and kind to me, but of love for you I did never have one thought.”

‘And then you was as one who is mad, and cried out that you would to Michael tell all the story ; and on my knees I did beseech you to have mercy, and

then you did seem ashamed, and bade me to have no fear, for that between Michael and me you would not come ; and I did think you kind and good, for I was not then so quick to see the evil as now I am become, since in these two years that are past, I have been thinking, thinking always, and to me you do seem a thing poor and to be despised, when I regard you by the side of my ever-dear husband Michael.

‘It may be that I do wrong you in thinking that you did break your vow to me, and speak evil of me to Michael on my wedding night, for it shall be possible that Stephen Prentice and William Marly, who did also know, did betray me, though to me it is not likely, since they were of hearts

so good, that of me they could not have thought evil.'

Did the girl know how pitilessly cruel sounded her words to the man who had been honourable and honest until the one fatal temptation of his life overcame him, turning all things good in him to vileness ?

And yet the harshest judgment that can be delivered by one mortal upon another can in no way approach in severity the unspoken condemnation of self that permeates the soul of a man who has once been virtuous, but is now absolutely abandoned to evil. No one but himself can realise the horror of the successive stages through which he passed ere he committed moral suicide, or can tell how every noble

quality, every good impulse, every sterling attribute has, in passing through the alchemy of sin, been transmuted from purest gold to most worthless dross ; no one but himself is able to lay side by side the pictures of what he once was, and what he now is.

‘And so it was ever,’ said Ninon sadly, ‘that while in my mind I did have such thoughts of you, it has seemed to me a bad thing that you should dare to bring to me your words of love, for if Michael had died that night it is his murderer that you would have been. But when to me he shall return I will tell to him the story—all, and he will know that poor Ninon sinned against him never. And though to wait for him is

long and weary, yet the end of it will come.

‘It was but now that a feeling strange and joyous did overcome me, as though somewhere my darling was at hand, and to myself I did say: “To-night he will surely come to me to-night” and for his sake I did put from me my dress of black for one such as he once did love but you, you do still seem to pass always like a shadow between him and me. . . .’

‘He will niver come back,’ said Martin, gently, ‘but this thing I can do for ye, sweetheart, that ye shall be vexed wi’ the sight o’ my face no more The luv that have bin my pride an’ my joy, my curse an’ my ruin, shall go wi’ me where

I go this night, but it shall be a weariness to you, Ninon, niver again. An' I will not ask ye to forgive me, because if ye knowed all, ye would hate me worse than th' lowest thing as crawls upon th' earth this night; but if ye could jest promise me in the futur', when all folks speak ill o' me, an' cast stones at my memory, ye would jest say to yerself: "He was bad, an' weak an' wicked, an' a coward, an' cruel traitor to me, but he luv'd me, he luv'd me always, else he had niver so sinned for me, an' but for one black temptation he might ha' lived an' died honest" do ye think ye could promise me that, my dear, an' then jest say in yer own sweet voice: "Good-bye, Martin, an' God bless you?"'

‘And for why should I say that?’ she said, troubled at his tone, and timidly putting out her heart to touch his, her gentle heart already reproaching her for having been unkind to him; ‘it is often again that I will be seeing you, only of love you must not speak to me ever. . . .’

He drew himself away from her touch as though she had stung him.

‘A murderer’s hand!’ he muttered to himself; then aloud he said gently :

‘Would ye mind saying them words, Ninon, just them, no more nor no less?’

A little wondering, yet wishful to humour him, following the bent of his fancy, she repeated his words after him :

‘Good-bye, Martin, and God bless you!’

For a moment he stood quite still, with the echo of her voice lingering in his ears ; then he raised a fold of the dress she wore to his lips, and went away without another word.





CHAPTER V.

THE WHOLE TRUTH.

MARTIN STRANGE, quitting the path above the shingle, and striking across the beach, paused to listen to footsteps that seemed to be following close upon his own.

A superstitious fear seized him as they drew nearer, for in them he thought he recognised just such a decisive tread as had been Michael Winter's in his lifetime !

Quickly recovering himself, however, and rendered indifferent to either spiritual or human interference by the resolve that animated his breast, he pushed steadily on, coming ere long to the line of rocks that lay between the village of Lynaway, and the town of Marmot up yonder. These rocks had one peculiarity that rendered them remarkable. It was this: about half-way across them, and two feet above high-water mark, to be reached only by clambering on the detached pieces of rock at its base, was a large circular cave cut out of the face of the gigantic and beetling cliff that in some places literally overhung the sea.

Whether used originally by smugglers, or carved out by the hand of man many hundreds of years ago, no Lynaway or

Marmot man could tell; of one thing only they were certain, that every year it was the means of saving more lives than one from drowning.

For the coast was a treacherous one, with many sharp curves and breaks, so that he who was not well acquainted with it might pursue his walk indifferently enough, believing himself to be in no danger from the advancing tide, until he suddenly discovered that he was hemmed in at all points, and unless he knew of the cave and could reach it in time, that a certain death awaited him. Such misfortunes were, however, rare, as but few strangers ventured on so rough a path, and those who lived hard by were well acquainted with the locality.

Knowing every step of the way, and making neither falter nor stumble, though the night was as black as pitch, Martin came at last to the cave of which I have spoken, and, climbing into it, stood still for a moment in an attitude of surprise and doubt, as those other footsteps paused, on the rocks below.

In another moment a man had swung himself up, and was standing beside him in the mouth of the cave.

One of those lightning convictions that now and again come to us mortals we know not whence, came to Martin then as he drew back, giddy with the surprise, yet absolutely without fear; for what was now to him the fury or vengeance of Michael, or any other man on earth? It

was all the same to him whether death came now, or an hour later, only he thought he would rather go out of the world at his own time, and in his own fashion and he wished no other sounds to intrude upon the echoes of certain words that would be in his ears at the moment of his departure.

‘So ye have come back, Michael Winter?’ he said, quietly, ‘an’ we all made so sure ye niver would—all o’ us but one.’

As he spoke, his hand stole to his breast, and closed upon something that he had hidden there for another purpose than the one to which it was now possible it would be put.

‘Ay! I have come back,’ cried Michael between his set teeth; ‘come back to drag the

truth, the whole truth, from those accursed lips of thine ; or, if thou wilt not speak, to kill thee like the vile dog that thou art !

‘Have a care, man,’ said Martin, with an evil snarl ; ‘maybe if there’s one o’ us to die to-night ’tis not me, and ’tis neither you nor any other as can make him speak as wunnot, though m’appen he may be the on’y man livin’ as could clear a woman’s character by openin’ his mouth. For look ye, what a young lass’ll tell to the man as she loves, to save her own credit, ain’t allers believed by him ; an’ if ye went back to Ninon now, this minnit, an’ she was to tell ye what she would, there’d iver be a doubt o’ her in your heart that ’ud turn yer luv to a black and bitter thing as the years went by.’

‘Then,’ cried Michael, seizing him by the arm, and dragging him to the mouth of the cave, ‘since speak you will not, come with me into her presence, and repeat that lie if you dare, which you swore to me as between man and man to be the truth two years and more ago !’

But with the suddenness of a wild-cat’s spring, Martin freed himself from Michael’s grasp and aware of every twist and turn of the cave, found no difficulty in eluding the vehement search of the other, who groped hither and thither, catching at thin air.

‘Ye’ll no take me anywhere agen my will,’ said Martin’s voice in the distance, ‘an’ into her presence this night I will not go—m’appen either you or I’ll look upon

her face again, but niver the two o' us
together, Michael Winter, so long as we
draw breath. As to the story, why, I'll
tell it ye, though not because I'm afeard—
maybe ye'll be sorry by-and-by t'ne'er us
heard it; 'twill make it o' our neither
for ye when——' 't make him

He paused abruptly, his fingers unconsciously strengthening on the weapon hidden in his breast.

‘ When fust Ninon come to Lynaway, she bein’ my cousin, she got to be home-like wi’ me, an’ wasn’t shy as wi’ the other lads; an’ when I come to the cottage (for her mother favoured me a bit, an’ didn’t mislike to see me there) Ninon ’ud talk away to me in her pretty, gentle way, an’ it seemed to me that ivery day she growed to like

me a bit better; but I sed to myself:
“I’ll wait a while longer; I won’t press
her for an answer yet,” she bein’ so young
an’ gay, with no thoughts of sich things as
marriage an’ lookin’ after a house, so I
swore to m. . . . till the day as we went
be the truth: . . . mot.’

But Michael drew nearer,
nearer still, scarcely breathing.

‘Niver havin’ bin there afore, she was so
pleased wi’ the sights, an’ the gran’ shops,
that ’twas past six o’clock afore we turned
our faces round to go towards Lynaway.
But as bad luck ’ud have it, we come past
a big show where they was actin’ wi’
puppet-dolls, an’ a crowd o’ people goin’ in
an’ out, an’ Ninon she stopped an’ said:
“Oh, Martin, I niver see anythin’ like

that in all my life." An' seein' her face so wistful, I was so foolish as to take her in, though I knowed all the while as 'twas wrong, an' that I bein' so much older than she, an' wiser in the ways o' the world, oughtn't to ha' kep her out so late, or give in to her wish.

'I mind to this day how she luffed at the rediklous figures as danced about the stage on strings, an' when we was come out, she put her little hand in mine, an' sed she: "Oh, Martin, it was all butiful, an' thank you iver so for such a treat." How it happened I shall niver know, but on lookin' at the clock I mistook the time, an' thought the hour were eight when it were really nine, an' knowin' that the tide wouldn't be in till half-past nine, I sed to

her: "Will you be afeard to come home the beach way, Ninon, as 'twill save us a good mile an' a half o' the way, an' it's gettin' very late to be abroad?"'

'She was not at all afeared, an' so we set out, an' the way bein' so rough, an' the night so dark, I got her to put her hand through my arm, an' all at once, afore I knowed what I was doin', I'd told her how I luv'd her, an' begged her to give me a bit promise that she'd be my wife some day.

'But she said, iver so gently, though I could tell she was frightened, an' for that I blamed myself, that she liked me dearly, and reckoned me her good friend, but she'd got no love for me, or any other man.

'The words was scarcely out o' her lips

when a cold sweat broke out over my face, for what should I hear but the sea rushin' an' roarin' about the base o' Smuggler's Folly, an' I knew as how I was out in my reckonin', that the tide was comin' in, an' that if we couldn't get to the cave in two minutes our lives wasn't worth the snuff o' a candle.

'I caught Ninon up in my arms an' ran like mad, an' cryin' out to her not to be frightened, I went straight into the water that comed up to my waist, and her gownd was all wet and drippin' when we got to t'other side. 'Twas easier work to git to the cave, an' I lifted her in, an' felt wild wi' myself at havin' made so foolish a mistake about the tide, and so brought all this trouble on the poor delicate lass, for I

knowed that we should be kep' there for hours, and what would all Lynaway be sayin' about us the while ?

'I took off my coat and wrapped her in it, she bein' so bitter cold ; and then, for she falled off sound asleep most d'reckly like a child, I sat down beside her, so as she could rest her pretty head agen my shoulder, the wall bein' so hard for her. I could lay my hand in the dark on the very place as she touched, and 'tis there my sinfu' head will lie by-and-by by-and-by . . . Ye needn't grudge me that bit time, man ; 'twas the fust and the last, an' she niver knowed it, for I jest moved away when she were wakin'. She was frightened and puzzled like when she found herself in the cave, an' then I

told her we must go our ways home, an' lifted her down from the cave.

'Twas an unlucky chance as brought Stephen Prentice an' William Marly to meet us the morn, but I was hopin' as they'd think Ninon an' I'd got up early to do a bit o' courtin' out walkin', so when Ninon wanted to stop an' tell 'em all about it, I pulled her along wi' me, and bade her niver say a word to no one, not even her mother, who'd gone away, but was comin' back in the arternoon, for though she was so innercent an' ignorant o' harm, I knowed what folks' tongues is, an' I didn't want 'em all clacking together over her an' me.

'But somehow, arter that night, Ninon was niver the same to me as she'd bin

afore, an' niver give me a smile or a welcome when I come to the cottage; but knowin' the queer ways o' girls, I didn't fret over it, for I guessed she'd bin a bit frightened at fust, an' I still think that she'd ha' grown to love me in time, if so be as ye hadn't come back when ye did.

'Well, ye came, an' 'twas all over wi' me then—I worn't so blind as I couldn't see that—but it seemed hard, hard, an' I went bitter an' mad over the loss o' her, an' all the good in me was turned to bad, an' the bad to worse agen, so that 'twas no wonder, as I often sed to myself, as how she couldn't larn to luv' me. Seeing her slip away from me ivery day, an' wi' my bad an' wicked heart allers

full o' her, mornin', noon, an' night, there come into my head a cruel an' cowardly thought, an' when next I come across her alone, I sed: "An' pray have you told Michael Winter that you was my sweet-heart before you was his, an' that you stayed away with me from twelve o'clock o' one day to five o' the clock the next?" "No," she sed, "because you did make me promise niver to tell any one; but I wish that you would let me, as I do not desire to have any secret, howsoever small, from him." They was jest her words, an' she looked at me so innercently that I could see that she didn't understand; but the look o' her sweet face on'y made me the madder to think o' what I had lost; so I said, with a bad kind o' a

smile : “ An’ are ye pretending not to know, Mistress Ninon, that if I was to go to Michael an’ tell him, that he’d niver look at or speak to ye again ?”

‘ She got as white as snow, for she had come to believe all I told her, an’ moreover, she was so gentle an’ humble always, that she niver set up her ’pinion ’gainst other folks, an’ God forgive me, but when I saw how she took it, I couldn’t but know as how the devil had put a weapon in my hand, if only I was so base an’ dishonourable as to use it agen her.

‘ I sed to her : “ Jest you go an’ tell Michael all about it, an’ see if he don’t say good-bye to ye, for mind ye, he’s a very perticular man about wimmin, an’ he’d

niver look at one as anybody as could up an' say a word to him about." An' then she got all puzzled and at sea, for she couldn't see how she war to blame, an' yet, if I told her she war, why then it must be so, for she niver could argue, an' was a child in all her ways an' thoughts, wi' not so much knowledge o' the world as a Marmot girl o' ten year old might have.'

'Coward!' burst from Michael, who stood convulsed by woe, remorse, joy, and a mad longing for revenge; 'for God's sake get to the end of this infernal story, before I have your blood upon my hands.'

'I have told ye,' said Martin, quite unmoved by this outburst, 'that my heart

war bad an' black, an' from sich a heart
only black deeds could come.

' I niver met her arter that, but I give
her a look or a side word as made her
wince, and once agen I asked her if she'd
told you, an' she cried iver so bitterly,
an' said she luv'd you far too well to run
the leastest risk o' your luv'in' her one
bit the less !

' Time went on, an' the night afore
your wedding day and hers come round,
an' 'twas that same evening I followed
her to the old chapel ruins, and catching
her there alone, prayed o' her that she
would give you up and come away with
me, I bein' mad wi' drink an' folly, an'
the wicked thoughts give to me by the
very devil himself. I sed: "An' if you

will not come, Ninon, I will tell Michael bad things o' you, an' he will believe them, for he will say: 'An' why did you not tell me of it all yerself, if there was no wrong in it, Ninon?'" I seem to see her now as she went down on her knees to me, prayin' me that I would not come atween her an' you. Somethin' touched me then, an' shamed me through an' through, an' I promised her, meanin' to keep my word.

'There's but little more to tell,' continued Martin, in the even, unconcerned voice of one who relates what he has seen, not what he has done. 'Ye married her, an' I bore the sight; ye took her home, an' I bore to see that also; but somethin' drove me to go into your

garden, to give one look at the house as held ye two together, not knowin' that ye was abroad learnin' things through the blabbin' tongues of two tipsy fools—things as 'ud send ye to me wi' a question on your lips as could be answered in jest one little word, yes or no.

' 'My body an' soul cried out agen her being yours; the loss o' her was pressing on me then wi' a bitterness I had niver knowed before, an' the awful temptation as beset me then, none can iver tell An' I told ye the damnelest, blackest lie that iver came out o' hell, not once, but twice over.

' O' what ye sed to me, or what I did arter that, I have niver knowed to this day, but the next thing I mind was

standin' on the shore beside Ninon, watching the boat come back in which old Peter sed ye had gone away. The words was tremblin' on my lips that I should say to ye when ye touched the shore, an' that should make ye reckon me the vilest wretch alive, but send ye straight to the arms o' her, when the boat came in *without* ye, an' I knew that I was as guilty o' yer death, as though I had killed ye wi' my own hand that night.'

'And so it was a lie,' said Michael below his breath. 'O, my God! it was a lie; and he could live—*live* with the fruit of that lie always before him—and dare to offer his love to the wife of the man who was, so far as he knew, murdered by that same lie!'

‘Only a lie—one lie—to give to her and to me two such years as they that are gone! And this is the man that I have called friend, whose word I have believed before the whole sweet life, and ways, and teaching of my pure and spotless girl, who had power to drive me out an outcast from all I held dear on earth . . . Man! what had I done to her, what had she, that ye should deal so vilely with us? And if I had died that night, I should have died, not knowing; for ever and ever I should have believed her to be what I might have known she never was, nor ever could be Thank God!’ he cried, his voice ringing out clear and bold (the future being then in his thoughts, not the past), ‘that the life I cursed and hated,

and would have joyed to part with, has clung to me to this moment, when, if I died the next, death would be sweet, since I'd take out of the world with me the knowledge of my girl's spotless purity

‘Hearken! When I fell overboard, with an ugly pistol-shot in my side, the men all thought that I sank, but ’twas not so; in the fighting and confusion I just struck out for shore, and there hid, being wishful that those in the boat should reckon me as dead. Though faint and stiff from the loss of blood, I kept my senses till morning, when I spied a sailing ship going by at no such great distance, and on my making such signals as I was able, the cap'en, thinking me in

danger of drowning, had a boat put about and took me on board. When next I came to myself I was in a hospital at Portsmouth; I stayed there six months, recovered, and went to the West Indies. There I stopped; but one night, all of a sudden it flashed across me that maybe 'twas *a lie* you'd told me that night, and I said to myself: "I'll go home, and if they're married and happy together, my girl and Martin Strange, I'll not come between them, for I'll know that 'twas the truth he told me; but if they're apart, I'll go straight to her, and ask her, and get the story from her own lips. O! my girl, my girl!" he groaned, turning aside, 'and was thou good and innocent always? And when I go into thy pre-

sence, wilt thou not reckon him that could credit so vile a story against thee to be as bad as the heart that conceived it? And yet—'twas but now I heard her gentle loving words, and how she was looking, looking always for my return.'

With the last syllables, his voice had softened to a rapture of passionate love, and with his enemy, vengeance, time, and place forgot, he saw but the face of Ninon as it had appeared to him an hour ago, all transfigured with the glorious welcome born for him, and him alone, that surely, surely it would again wear when actually in the flesh he stood before her? And the miserable wretch yonder, feeling with every throb of Michael's heart, knowing how in that rapture of approaching re-

union his treachery and he alike find no place—nay, how revenge itself is washed away in the love that rises as a thanksgiving unto Heaven—presses nearer, nearer yet in the darkness, deliberately weighing a human life in the balance.

To slay or to spare the man before him—which ? With one swift, sudden stroke to dash out all the new-found joy, the praise, the anticipation : to slay his enemy now, at the one supreme moment of his existence, with the untasted sweetness and treasure of the future lying at his very lips, or to spare, and so send him back to her, to the reward of a loss made perfect through suffering, to a life which this past time of watching and waiting should serve but to crown with a greater glory

and happiness, while *his* lot would be to live in their memories as the liar, coward, and traitor, who had striven hard, yet pitifully failed, in his attempt to separate them.

The thought maddened him, and, stronger even than the jealousy of Michael that had betrayed him to dishonour, rose in him the dogged resolve that living or dying, she should never know the full meed of his guilt, for that upon the only lips on earth that could speak it to her, should that night be set the seal of eternal silence.

For himself, he would die also ; and when she should hear of him as dead, perchance she would forget her suspicions of him, and remembering only his great

love for her, find it in her gentle heart to sorrow for him as for a lost friend ; while as years went by, and Michael never came, she would grow weary of waiting, and in time cease to remember him, save as one who had cruelly mistrusted and wronged her.

He had rejoiced in his happiness all too soon, yon poor fool, and short and sharp should be his awakening. Let him dream on a few moments longer of the lover's lips that he would never press, of the joys that he would never grasp, of the broad sunlit path of life his feet should never tread ; then let death come to him and swallow up all—death that he had but now said would be sweet to him, that must in very truth be so unutterably

bitter; in the place of love, darkness, annihilation, himself and his passionate hopes resolved into a mere handful of dust.

I wonder is it given unto a man to know the critical moment in his destiny, when he stands on the shadowy borderland that divides life and happiness on the one side, death and despair upon the other? Michael at least never knew how Ninon, and love, and life, almost passed him by, and the death of a dog, at a traitor's hand became his portion, in the few seconds when, dumb beneath the weight of his great gladness, he stood fearless and defenceless at the mercy of Martin Strange.

He dreamed not of the knife lifted high in the darkness above him, or how,

at the very moment when the will should have given impetus to the hand, that hand had faltered, sunk, and finally fallen nerveless as a child's at Martin's side.

He did not hear, though clear and distinct as a vesper bell rang in the ears of that other the words uttered by a woman's voice, strangely sweet and sorrowful: *'Good-bye, Martin, and God bless you!'* Audible to Martin's alone, he trembled beneath them, and shrank back, a violent revulsion of feeling taking place in his soul. Even as but now he had been forgotten by Michael, so did he now forget the man who had won his sweetheart from him, as there rose before him a face wistful and broken-hearted, of which he had made all the sorrow and the pain,

yet that had worn for him no bitter angry looks ; nay, from whose gentle lips had fallen words of pity, of blessing of blessing, and for *him* !

* * * * * *

‘Get ye gone, man,’ cried Martin’s voice, suddenly and harshly, ‘get ye gone to her now, while ye may. There’s no more to ask nor to tell, an’ she’s lookin’ an’ watchin’ for you out yon, as she’s looked an’ watched this many a night an’ day—an’ when ye’ve told her all the story o’ my black an’ sinfu’ deed, tell her jest this: How them words o’ her’n, that she spoke two hours ago, has come between me an’ a deadlier sin than any I iver wrought her yet, an’ how they’ll bide wi’ me always ’tis soundly an’

well I'll sleep wi' them in my ears this night.

'Are ye there still? If ye're waitin' till I say I'm sorry for what I've done, ye'll wait for iver, an' don't forget that I luv'd her, luv'd her always.'

* * * * *

At the same moment that a man, self hurled into the presence of his Maker, murmurs in dying, 'She sed "*Good-bye, Martin, an' God bless you!*"' a young girl, who kneels by her window praying, hears the sound of Michael's footstep 'as he comes up the stair.' She has always known that, sooner or later, whether he come in the spirit or the flesh, she will hear it, and now that the moment has indeed come, she is moved by no shock of sur-

prise or fear, only, in that pure content that may be deemed the fruition of perfect faith, she gazes, still kneeling, at the half-open door, that opens not, only moves slightly, as though stirred by a breath, a sigh ; and verily it is a man, conscience-stricken and sorely ashamed, who stands without, scarce daring to venture into the presence of the woman he has so cruelly wronged, so sorely tried.'

Slowly the aperture widens, and before her eyes she sees him, her lost bridegroom, her Michael—pale, shadowy, silent, his bearing downcast and full of shame ; and as, still not daring to look up, he approaches and kneels beside her, she stretches out her arms and draws his head down to her breast and then, be-

tween them silence tears

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